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OBLIVION GOES MAD!

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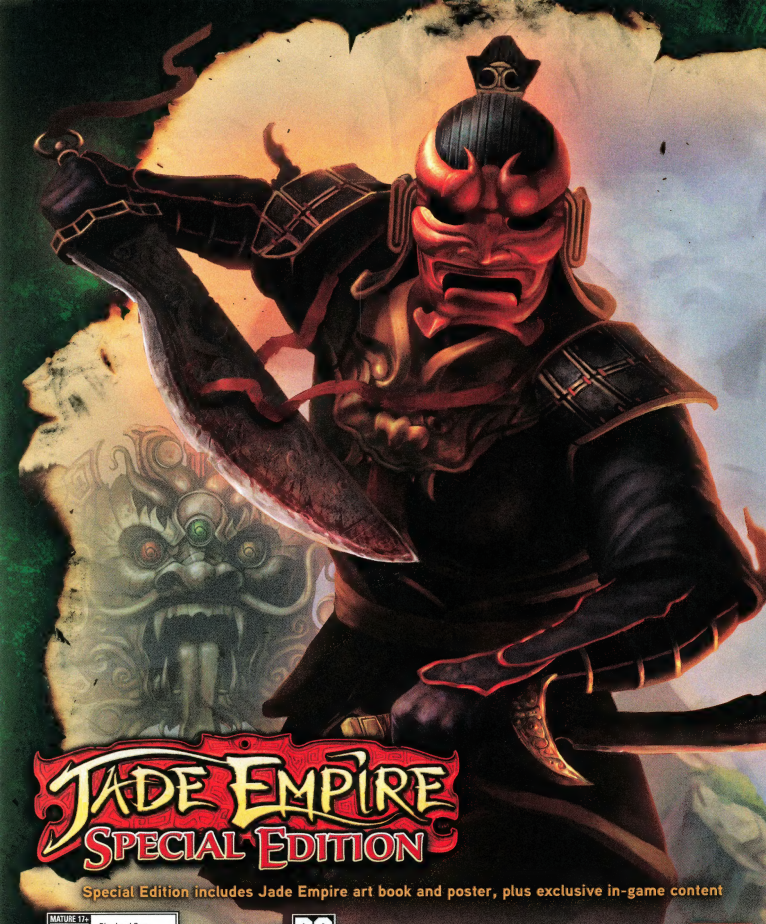

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Does anybody even read this?

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW04.1UP.COM

There are two sides to every coin. Once you've read about the best games of the year on pg. 17, find out what we think were the worst. Also, more goodies from our *Frontlines* cover story.

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LOOKING BACK ON 2006...

...and forward to 2007!

With the big boss sidelined by the fatal neurotoxins I slipped into his Kool-Aid when he wasn't looking, my reign of terror at *GFW* can finally begin. Just kidding—as I write this, editor-in-chief Jeff Green's at home battling a pair of pneumonia (get well soon!), which means you're stuck with me yammering about what's going on in this here magazine.

Old-time *Computer Gaming World* readers will complain note that we unceremoniously skipped the Game of the Year rigmarole in 2005, an error which we clearly didn't want to repeat this year (you can stop sending us hate mail now). But instead of doling out genre awards (and doing a lot of good games the disservice of recognizing a single outstanding title per genre), we present you with the 10 games and seven top trends that mattered most in 2006, along with our 1UP Awards recognizing achievement in art direction, innovation, and several other special categories. Did any of your favorites make the cut? Are we just a bunch of biased morons? How the heck did *Jaws Unleashed* wind up as our No. 1 pick? As always, we're eager to hear what you think—just as long as you remember that our opinions are right, and yours aren't. Ha!

Switching gears, we're about to rush headlong into some of the biggest games of 2007: *Supreme Commander*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, and *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*, just to name a few. What lies ahead for these and other eagerly awaited Games for Windows (see how I did that?) with the advent of Windows Vista, DirectX 10, Live Anywhere, and the growing popularity of on-demand services such as Steam? To quote the title of a well-known *World of WarCraft* quest (and a famous *Legend of Zelda* line): It's a secret to everybody.

Ryan Scott
Reviews Editor
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Ryan's Top 5 Games of the 2006

1. *Eve Online* (hey, I just started playing it in 2006!)
2. *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II*
3. *Guild Wars Nightfall*
4. *Sam & Max: Episode 1—Culture Shock*
5. *Ticket to Ride*

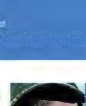
Looking Forward To: Restored My Amiga Set
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

STAFF TOP 5 OF 2006

JEFF GREEN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

1. *Company of Heroes*
2. *Half-Life 2: Episode One*
3. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
4. *Titan Quest*
5. *Ticket to Ride*

Looking Forward To: Not being so damn sick
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com



SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

1. *World of WarCraft* (silence, you)
2. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
3. *Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords*
4. *DEFCON*
5. *Rise of Legends*

Looking Forward To: *Alan Wake*, a full year of *WOW: The Burning Crusade*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

1. *Company of Heroes*
2. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
3. *Half-Life 2: Episode One*
4. *Rise of Legends*
5. *Sam & Max: Episode 1—Culture Shock*

Looking Forward To: My honeymoon
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

1. *Company of Heroes*
2. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
3. *Half-Life 2: Episode One*
4. *DEFCON*
5. *Bonnie's Bookstore*

Looking Forward To: New Aesop Rock, Sage Francis, Brother Ali, and El-P albums
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

1. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
2. *Prey*
3. *DEFCON*
4. *Lego Star Wars II*
5. *Half-Life 2: Episode One*

Looking Forward To: *Alan Wake*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

1. *Boarhaven Adventures*
2. *Sam & Max: Episode 1—Culture Shock*
3. *Lego Star Wars II*
4. *Tomb Raider: Legend*
5. *ZOO*

Looking Forward To: Playing my Nintendo DS. Life-sense more.
1UP.com Blog: GFWRose.1UP.com

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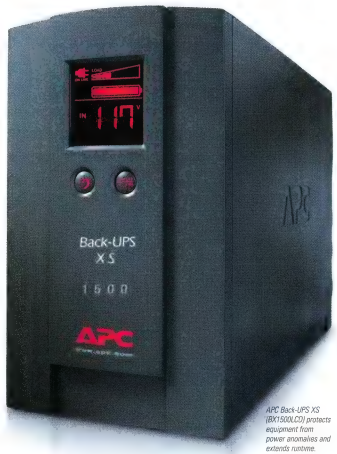

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Letters

Words, sentences, and paragraphs

LETTER OF THE MONTH

POSTCARD FROM A NORRATHIAN MOUNTAINTOP

Dear Mr. Green,

While sitting here on my lonely mountain, I chanced to hear about your kind mention of me in your recent article about *EverQuest* (*GFW* #2, pg. 108). Please come back and get me. Can it be all over so soon? I think not. Remember, I am your love, your life, your..."precious."

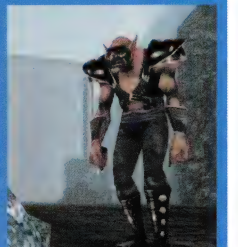
What's one more dog, now, chum?

Pat Pierson, secretary for
Sir Doarkus, Dwarf Paladin of Norrath

Dear Sir Doarkus:

The Green Man is mine now, do you hear? Mine! So keep your distance... I've got 2 points in Improved Curse of Agony. And I will use them. Soooooo!

Cheers,
Eyybert, Gnome Warlock of Azeroth



"O, Doarkus. It's so cold and lonely here without you."

COMMON GRIPES

I'm happy to see that I'm not the only one having difficulties with the state some games are in when they hit the stores. Sometimes, I do feel like a beta tester indeed. I also really liked Tom Chick's review of *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* (*GFW* #2, pg. 86). I played the game, and although I did experience some bugs, my biggest beef is that I bought the game on a Thursday evening and was done by Sunday afternoon.

Scorpio 1956

I want to thank Jeff Green for his editorial regarding the condition of games being released today. I have long been worried about the sad state of video-games on release day. My most recent purchases—*Battlefield 2142*, *Dark Messiah*, and *Neverwinter Nights 2*—were released long before they were ready; at best, they were partially polished beta versions, but they were nowhere near ready for release.

I'm one of those guys who keeps all his old games handy because I like to replay them often; *MechCommander Gold* is one that comes to mind immediately. Because of this desire to stroll down memory lane so often, I sometimes have to scour the Internet to look for patches I forgot to store properly and lost. As I crawl the Web, chasing one dead link after another, I frequently think, "If they'd made it right the first time, I wouldn't have this problem."

I agree with Jeff's refrigerator analogy—I feel that greed has superseded common sense, and the world has somehow become apathetic in regards to quality software creation. Software developers have fooled us into believing that it's perfectly acceptable for them to produce sloppy, substandard products. Their mantra being: "We'll fix it with a patch." That is a horrible mentality to have, and I know that it's not necessary. When I bought *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*, I was treated to fully playable, bugless games that ran flawlessly on my decent machine. The trade-off was wait time. Yes, I had to wait an extra year for *Doom 3*, but it was well worth it. I applaud id and Valve for their adherence to a higher set of morals.

John McGivern

CASUAL CASUALTY

I've been a big gamer my whole life, but this past year or so, I've been shying away from longer, more involved games. I've devoured many great casual games (*Bookworm Adventures* springs to mind), sometimes beating them in as few as two sittings, but I just cannot commit myself to anything that would require an emotional investment (*Oblivion*, *Prey*, or even *Half-Life 2*, for god's sake). Is something wrong with me?

Keenahn

Aside from the fact that you think *Prey* will require some sort of "emotional investment," no, what you're experiencing is fairly normal. Casual games are fun. We have a column called Falling Pieces devoted to them every month, and if you look at our picks for the best 10 games of 2006 later in this issue, you'll probably be a bit surprised by what you see.

FOUL PLAY?

I just finished reading your Ultimate Gaming Machine article (*GFW* #2, pg. 116) and saw that the winner, VoodooPC, underperformed Falcon Northwest on all of the test-run scores on pages 122 and 123. To me, it looks like Falcon won. What's up with that?

Aaron Cooperband

It's a fair question, but we only had room for the synthetic benchmark in the story...for the full picture, go to the extremely thorough testing results at http://go.extremetech.com/UGM. Also, in the end, keep in mind that it was about more than just performance. In fact, the guys at Falcon contacted us and thanked us for a fair competition and agreed with the results. You can't get any fairer than the second place guy says, "good game," y'know?

PRESCRIPTION FOR PAINLESS PLAY?

I had to sympathize with Darren Gladstone's column (*GFW* #2, pg. 58) about the pain he's feeling in his left hand from using the WASD keymap. I had to quit *World of WarCraft* because of it.

My own keymapping system has never produced those symptoms. With it, I can play for hours and not feel any pain:

A = crouch
S = backward
D = strafe left
F = strafe right
Right mouse = forward
Left mouse = primary attack
Middle mouse = secondary attack
G = reload
Z = use
Left shift = walk/run
V = lean left
B = lean right
C = flashlight
Spacebar = jump

Roger

THERE IS NO WAR

I am pleased to hear you don't plan to bash console gaming (*GFW* #2, pg. 18). It's getting pretty old to hear some of the competition to your magazine take such harsh measures against console gaming, as if it makes you less of a gamer for playing *Gears of War*. Props to all the editors who had the balls to admit they're playing console games.

Especially *Viva Piñata*—that game rocks.

Jason Reid

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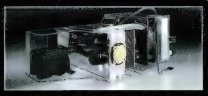

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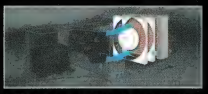
4. Fluid passes through the heat exchanger and is cooled a second time by the air system.

2. Heat from the air enters the radiator, beginning the cooling action.

5. Any heat dissipated by the CPU is transferred to the fluid system at the cold plate, which is cooled against the CPU.



3. The fan between the radiator and the thermoelectric heat exchanger pushes the air through, further cooling the flow.

6. The circuit board manages delivery of 12VDC power to the thermoelectric cooling devices and regulates the speed of the pump.

†**OVERCLOCK:** Dell does not recommend operating the processor or other system component beyond factory default settings. Overclocking may cause system instability and reduce the operating life of your system components. Dell does not provide technical support for any hardware or software issues arising from any third party application, such as NVIDIA nTune 5.0, used to enable overclocking. Dell provides technical support only for overclocking settings available within the system BIOS.

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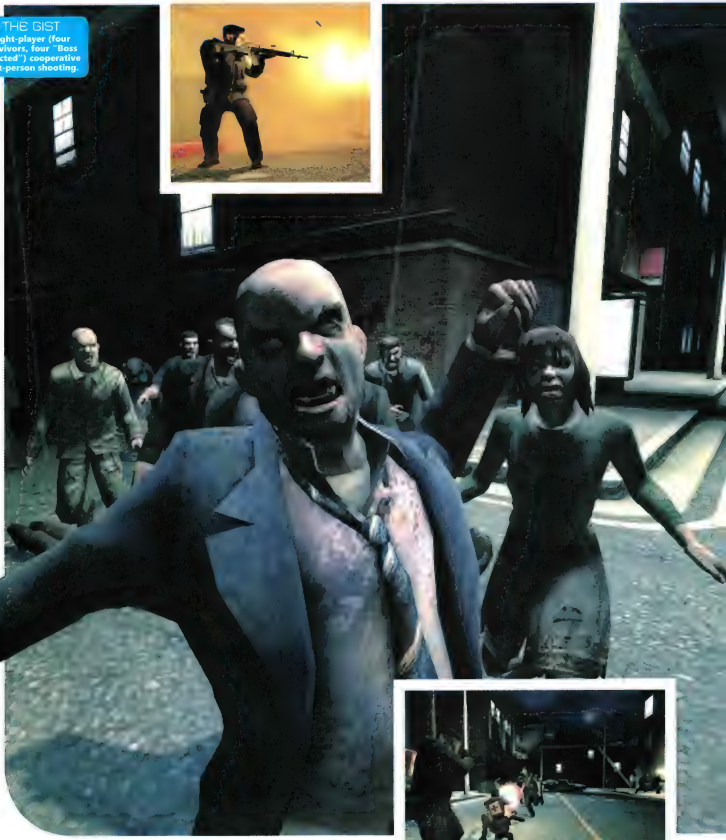
Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion

THE GIST
Eight-player (four survivors, four "Boss Infected") cooperative first-person shooting.



INSIDE

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Why Europe's markets are making PC gaming possible.

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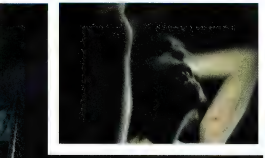
Sins of a Solar Empire
Space math: *Homeworld* + *Galactic Civilizations II* = RT4X strategy.

PREVIEW
The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles
Oblivion officially expands.



60 MINUTES TO LIVE

Hands-on and online with *Left 4 Dead*

PUBLISHER: **Valve Software** DEVELOPER: **Turtle Rock** GENRE: **FPS survival-horror** RELEASE DATE: **Spring**

PREVIEW

On a table are pump shotguns, pistols, and bullet boxes in rows, rag-plugged bottles, and too few first-aid tins. We take what we can while we can and line up like its Judgment Day after the tattooed longhair at the door.

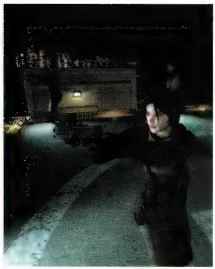
"Open it?"

"Open it."

Downstairs a live dead man—fishbone ribs, lolling tongue, and no cheek—turns and starts. I shoot.

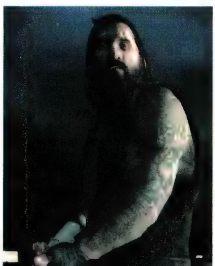
Former men and women, large and small, arrive and begin skipping up steps in an unruly backward fire drill. Lead zings until chambers click hollow and we close and lock the door and the zombies shear a hole in it and their masks show through, gape-mouthed and ghastly. Already, we've learned to take turns on our triggers and leapfrog reloads.

Dime-a-dozen biters pop out in droves 30 to 40 thick, full tilt on their feet like in *28 Days Later*. They arrive at the front, the flanks, and the rear, always spawning somewhere offscreen and fresh so that gallery shooting isn't an issue at all, and we survivors stay on guard. They give chase up the railcars we climb over and think we're safe on, proving *Left 4 Dead* producer Michael Booth's point when he says "neckbiters not only go where survivors go, they get there in fast and fluid fashion."



● ***Left 4 Dead*'s stat tracker counts each shot fired and awards skill-based badges.**

In a car-strewn street not far from the train yard, we requisition a police cruiser's rifles, lick our wounds, and help the longhair who has no more medicine of his own. Music that means "boss battle" starts up and someone says, "That's the Tank," when a giant, steroid-ripped and grunting, rages our way. Player-controlled—up to four other people populate a server's "Boss Infected" slots—it pushes and presses and hurls cars without wheels and whose creaking parts clap on their hinges. One of us is bowled onto his ass. He fires face-up and would've lain there limp-legged, only the Tank whops him another one that we won't be bandaging (instead of turning infected, KIA survivors sit the level out and reenter later when freed from closets and other contrivances). In all this time we add weight to the thing, 147 lead grams a pop, until at last it topples.



QUICK DEAD QUARTET

Progress is largely linear with false forks between points A and B, like when two of our outfit break and enter a warehouse window, drop down, and unlatch the door from inside. Boss Infected—Hunters, Boomers, Tanks, and Smokers—are less limited, allowed backstage where they track the living through walls and know when and when not to lie in wait. (The Hunter—able to leap tall buildings, if not in a single bound, then in a zig-zagging series of them—one-ups the others.)

Infected pester and irritate. They're lethal, though only in numbers and when nagging the weak, and playing one is unlike anything because the best man, live or dead, doesn't win—not often, not directly. Better to cause a commotion, kill or no kill, like the vile Boomer whose vomit draws 10 or 15 Infected from near and far to overwhelm the one wearing it.

LAST RITES OF THE DEAD

At the 40-minute mark, we reach a rooftop heliport and await rescue. Half of the town's inhabitants, the ones we haven't killed, are behind us and we hear them in the building beneath. We stop at a lightweight shed—Tattoo and me on top and two inside where a .50 caliber gun mount covers the stairwells and fire escapes—and brace ourselves for videogame pandemonium.

The spray of bullets walks across zombies, right over sheet metal and brick, pacing from one end of the building back to the other, and all hell breaks loose. We smash Molotovs to light a firewall, and shoot down the Infected who pass through, burning and undead. The mob encircles us. A Boomer works itself into the shed, and Tattoo says, "Dude, don't shoot it," but they do and it blows up. Then a Hunter wallops him over the ledge and he hangs there yelling "Help!"...like I can with that brain-hungry horde closing in. ● **Shawn Elliott**

> THE SPRAY OF BULLETS WALKS ACROSS ZOMBIES, RIGHT OVER SHEET METAL AND BRICK.

GATEWAY EUROPA

Surprise, surprise! The world's largest regional computer-gaming market isn't the U.S.

CULTURE

Getting your head around the European gaming industry can be like nailing water to a wall. Across Europe's jutting peninsular geography ranges a motley collection of some four dozen heterogeneous countries, dependencies, and territories—a culture quilt with traditions reaching back to antiquity. Extending from the Iberian Peninsula in the west and Iceland in the north to the Russian Ural Mountains in the east, Europe may rank as only the "sixth-largest continent" in terms of size, but its more than 807 million inhabitants boost it up to third place when it comes to people—with over 12 percent of the world's population. Read: "Potential mother lode" in consumer-product-marketing-speak.

Consider that stereotypical bastion of tea and crumpets, bad teeth, chips, bowler hats, and umbrellas: The United Kingdom houses over 60 million citizens, four official languages, and the sixth-largest GDP in the world ($1.8 trillion). In the U.S., international gaming coverage is shallow at best, limited mostly to "who's getting which console when?" wrangling. But how often do you hear about the U.K. constituting the third-largest gaming market in the world after the U.S. and Japan? Or how U.K. videogame sales have leaped 26.8 percent since 2001, with industry odds on gaming outperforming most major U.K. retail sectors over the next five years? Maybe you've read that U.S. game sales now regularly outpace domestic film numbers but lose three-to-one if you include the home video market? In the U.K., by contrast, the gaming market beats not only the box office, but also wallops video rentals by a factor of two. Not surprisingly, U.K. consumers spend more on videogames than gyms, movies, and nightclubs.

Have a look at the U.S. fast-food industry for a taste of European encroachment. Whistle up a Burger King BK Value Meal, and for $4 extra you can have a piece of "advergaming" gold courtesy of Blitz Games, one of Europe's largest independent videogame developers. *Pocketbike Racer, Big Bumpin'*, and *Sneak King* (that last one tasks you somewhat eerily with employing stealth moves to deliver BK meals to the hungry and health-carefree) collectively sold 2 million copies in just four weeks. Margins aside, that's in line with sales figures for *Gears of War*, U.S.-based Epic's Xbox 360 megahit.

Keep going. *Battlefield 2142*, developed by Sweden-based DICE, has been on U.S. and international top-10 charts for months. Another recent top-10er, *Medieval II: Total War*, was designed by U.K.-based Creative Assembly. European developers are popping up everywhere and turning out multilateral hits like gangbusters.

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN VALK

What's more, European studios actually hedge that revenue to fund development overseas, including games tailored specifically for the U.S. market. Without Europe, claims one Poland-based developer, the budget for U.S. and other market PC games would drop by nearly three-quarters. Can you say "Old World sugar daddy"?

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Between 1995 and 2002, a combined total of over 900 million games and education-based CD-ROMs were sold in Europe alone, and in 2002, the Entertainment Leisure Software Publishers Association predicted Western Europe would become the largest computer-gaming market in the world by 2004. But did it happen?

According to Reality Pump Studios founder Alexandra Constandache, "absolutely." Her Krakow, Poland-based company—behind the futuristic real-time strategy *Earth 21XX* series—is currently fine-tuning a PC RPG called *Two Worlds*. "For a PC game, the [European Union] is 70 percent of the world market," says Constandache. "Because the retail space in the U.S. for PC titles has been dramatically reduced, U.S. retailers prefer console titles." Visit your local GameStop these days and you'll likely concur that scanning the company's computer-games "section" is like riffling through the meager science shelf in most bookstores. "In Europe, by contrast, the bulk of retail space is dedicated to PC titles," Constandache says.

Ubisoft's North American president, Laurent Detoc, notes that roughly one-third of his company's computer-game sales come from North America, while two-thirds come from Europe. Of course, those numbers still vary dramatically depending on branding and content. "Films, television shows, or videogames that are blockbusters in the U.S. are often blockbusters in Europe, but not always," he says. "When we develop our own brands, we do so with both markets in mind; we try to ensure that works in one market will also work in another. We usually try to be global, but some games remain U.S.- or European-specific, to adapt better to local markets."

And while Western Europe basks in the glow of computer-games market bigwigs like France and Germany, Ukraine-based GSC Game World's Anton Bolshakov insists you shouldn't overlook the contributions of former Soviet republics. Bolshakov is project lead on the forthcoming *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, an action game that takes place largely in and around the calamitous Chernobyl nuclear power plant. "The popular belief that these countries suffer economically from high piracy rates is incorrect," he says, claiming that for most of the European Union countries (Ukraine is not a member), the level of game-industry piracy is higher. "While the street prices >

"FOR A PC GAME, THE [EUROPEAN UNION] IS 70 PERCENT OF THE WORLD MARKET. BECAUSE RETAIL SPACE HAS BEEN REDUCED, U.S. RETAILERS PREFER CONSOLE TITLES."

–ALEXANDRA CONSTANDACHE, FOUNDER REALITY PUMP STUDIOS

Big-budget Euro shooters S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl and Crysis (below).

on games in ex-U.S.S.R. countries remain at the level of 10 to 12 U.S. dollars, the volume of copies sold is in excess of 300,000, and some are even setting records with as many as 500,000 copies sold."

Regardless of where you look, however, it's tough to recoup a multimillion-budget triple-A PC game based solely on the European market, says Raphaël Colantonio, CEO and creative director of France- and U.S.-based Arkane Studios. "It's hard even if you factor U.S sales," he says. "The triple-A PC market is simply brutal. It's on or off, hit or miss. It's mainly hardcore gamers, and they're equal parts demanding and critical wherever you go."

CULTURE CLUBBING

Aggregate Europe and you get your "largest PC market" number, but the U.S. still trumps any single European territory, and publishers want nothing more than worldwide launches, day one. So what about culture bleed? Aren't there significant differences between U.S. and European gamers? "European games tend to be more hardcore and difficult to play than North American ones," challenges GSC's Bolshakov. "Thus developers over here must actively work to simplify their games' difficulty and learning curves to make them more appealing to American customers."

Tough words for Americans, but dig a little deeper and you might argue Bolshakov is talking less about the underlying mechanics of the games than the way they're presented. At least, that's what Arkane's Colantonio thinks. "You're mainly talking simple presentation stuff," he argues. "At the end of the day, U.S. and European gamers have more or less the same tastes—we all like the same things." But how a game is presented is paramount, says Colantonio. "If the interface isn't superaccessible or well thought-out, the American audience will generally be more picky about it." That's because Americans want to "get it" immediately, or else they lose patience and toss the game away, he says, adding that "in Europe, gamers are a bit more tolerant. Europeans will say, 'OK, I don't get the idea immediately, but I might eventually.'"

> THE TRIPLE-A PC MARKET IS BRUTAL. IT'S MAINLY HARDCORE GAMERS. EQUAL PARTS DEMANDING AND CRITICAL.
>
> —RAPHAEL COLANTONIO, CEO, ARKANE STUDIOS

But what about Americans stereotyping Europeans as economically paralytic, psychologically neurotic, and welfare-spoiled, while Europeans return the favor by characterizing Americans as gunslinging, bible-thumping, flag-waving, and spoiled in general? "There certainly are other cultural differences between European and American consumers: different tastes, different likes and dislikes, and so on," says GSC's Bolshakov. "On the other hand, you find that just comparing two neighboring countries, hence there's a lot of hand-wringing for developers trying to satisfy players around the globe. To be frank, not every game can satisfy international needs. You have to be very lucky to have a universally appealing game."

Bolshakov says that developers often adapt their games to other markets, sometimes padding with extra content or even rebranding to target a particular market. "Our company's

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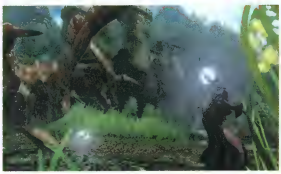

Clockwise from left: Cossacks 3, Sudden Strike II, Medieval II: Total War, and Company of Gothic 3.

first big hit was the historical-strategy *Cossacks* series, which at this point has sold over 5 million copies worldwide," he says. "Our primary market for *Cossacks* was Europe, partially owing to its story, which focuses on European historic conflicts—and, of course, it didn't sell as well in North America." GSC followed up with something designed specifically for the North American market. That game—*American Conquest*—used the same engine and game conceits, but it was steeped in American Colonial history. Another example of rebranding is the company's *Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars*, which is how it was sold in Europe. For the U.S. release, however, GSC printed *Napoleonic Wars* above *Cossacks 2* to create stronger associative appeal for the average U.S. gamer, who wouldn't have a clue what a Cossack is.

Reality Pump's Constandache wants to achieve that appeal on as broad a scale as possible. "That means we're essentially doing the same thing as the film industry," she says, referring to the blockbuster 1996 sci-fi film *Independence Day*, which she describes as a quintessentially "American" movie, internationally successful—and helmed by Roland Emmerich, a European director. According to Constandache, European games address the American audience first, while the rest of the world follows. "Part of this involves searching for the intersecting set between all markets," she explains. "For instance, nudity has to be avoided in the States, strong violent content can't be sold in Germany, rude language is forbidden in France, and game content related to the Iraq War or 'antiterror' in general is unwanted in Europe. So, basically, we design a game for the U.S. market and avoid anything that is unwanted in the rest of the world."

GLOBAL FREQUENCY

You could argue the shift toward mass-market gaming has been in the cards from the start. Chalk it up to the tireless march of technology as disparate societies and standards are gradually eroded by the homogenizing forces of social globalization. "With instantaneous digital communication, the differences between U.S. and European cultures are diminishing," says Ubisoft's Detoc. "Europeans are watching YouTube at the same time as Americans, and culture is driven by what people find interesting across many mediums. Influential media is coming from all around the globe."

GSC's Bolshakov thinks much the same, attributing the rise of "global gaming" to inevitable technological evolution. "Technologies seem to be generating and driving all the genre fashions on a global scale," he argues. "It's hard to ascribe certain genre-development tendencies to a particular territory anymore. We could assume the increasingly popular [massively multiplayer] online games fashion comes from Asia, for example—but that's not necessarily so, as technologies penetrate the globe more or less at the same time. As more people get fast Internet connections in Europe and America, the demand—and, hence, appeal—of online play increases."

If there's a fly in the ointment, it's that the culture exchange tends to be uneven. "I don't think there's much theme-based conflict of interest between American and European markets," says Bolshakov. "So, for instance, I think players both in Europe and America are sick of new World War II games. But in my experience, European players 'digest' the American-themed games well enough, while European topics hardly ever get the same level of consumption in America." That's a shame to the extent it's true, but it's probably par for the course when cultures and economies collide...and the march toward multilateral gaming continues. ● **Matt Peckham**

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XTRAS

Read our full interview with *Sins of a Solar Empire* producer Blair Fraser and Stardock Director of Games Publishing Brian Clair at RFW04.1UP.com.

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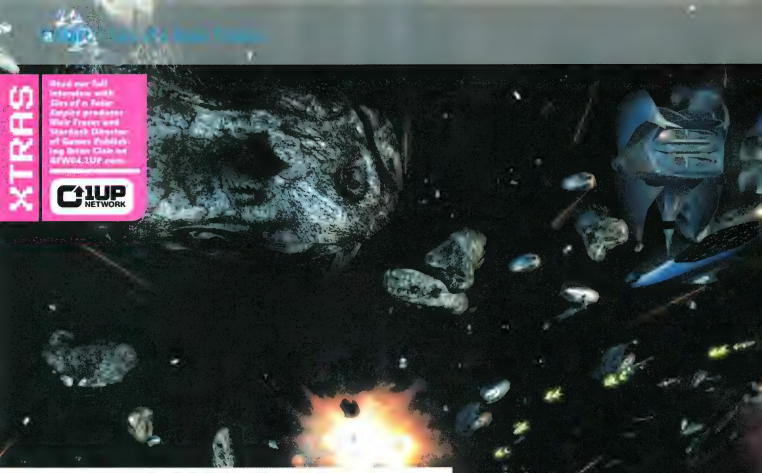
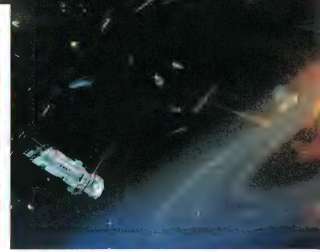


Three factions seek atonement in *Sins*: the Trader Emergency Coalition, the ancient alien Vasari, and the black-sheep post-human psychics of The Advent.

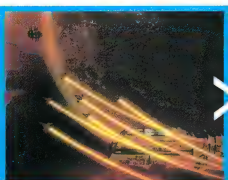


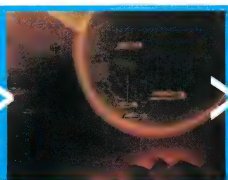
"I'M SURE EMPEROR PALPATINE HAD SOME SMALL FLEETS SCOUTING AND COLONIZING, BUT I DOUBT HE WAS ISSUING THEM ORDERS WHEN THE REBEL FLEET ARRIVED AT ENDOR."

–BLAIR FRASER, PRODUCER, IRONCLAD

COMMAND SUPREMELY

"It's possible to see the paint on the wing of a fighter and then zoom out seamlessly with the scroll wheel to see the entire galaxy," says producer Blair Fraser of *Sins*' interface. For a sense of scale: "A fighter is about 10 meters long; capital ships are 1,000 meters; planets about 10,000 meters; and the distance between two solar systems is on the order of 250,000,000 meters." As you zoom, units transform into icons representing distance, unit type, and ownership; at key thresholds, the icons simplify further to prevent confusing clustering.





SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

Hybridized, hard sci-fi strategy

PUBLISHER: **Stardock** DEVELOPER: **Ironclad** GENRE: **Real-Time 4X Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **August 2007**

PREVIEW

"The biggest problem I have with 4X games is the limitation on multiplayer," says *Sins of a Solar Empire* producer Blair Fraser. "Turn-based implicitly means that you have to wait for everyone else to finish their turn."

A MATCH MADE IN THE HEAVENS

Sins is the first foray into publishing without developing for Stardock, creator of like-minded 4X game Galactic Civilizations II. "The game drew our attention," admits Stardock Director of Games Publishing Brad Clark. "It's uncanny how much alike the culture is between our two companies. It makes working together pretty seamless." Like GC2, *Sins* will ship without copy protection—one of the keys to GC2's sales success.

Channel sci-fi novelist Vernor Vinge by naming your game something like *Sins of a Solar Empire*, pit a faction called the Trader Emergency Coalition against telepathic democrats in "The Advent," and you've pretty much declared your audience before you've even announced your genre: Hard-science-fiction fanatics, lookie here! Billed with the invented acronym "RT4X," developer Ironclad Games is fusing the pace of real-time strategy and the grander scale of 4X strategy games like *Civilization* (or Stardock sibling *Galactic Civilizations II*) on a *Homeworld*-style 3D interstellar stage. Sound complicated? Probably—but Ironclad seems intent on making sure *Sins* isn't a cross to bear.

"It's often been said that the player's attention is the trumping meta-resource in RTS games," says *Sins* producer Blair Fraser, "and this is no less true in *Sins*." A simple interface is primary, and *Sins* begins with a streamlined, *Supreme Commander*–style system that can zoom from a single starship to an entire star cluster with a flick of the scroll wheel (see "Command Supremely," below). An Empire Tree overlay gives you all the information and access you need regardless of zoom level, offering collapsible hierarchies of your stars, planets, and orbiting fleets, along with filters to display only your immediate concerns. Automation lets you dodge micromanagement if you like, especially when you're faced with multiple battles at once, but as Fraser warns, "In a complicated situation, no A.I. is going to outperform a human.... I'm sure Emperor Palpatine in *Return of the Jedi* had some small fleets off scouting, containing natives, and colonizing various planets, but I doubt he was issuing too many orders to them when the Rebel fleet arrived at Endor."

From colonial unrest to budgetary red flags to breaking skirmishes, communication is key for any successful emperor—and aside from the usual warning signs, *Sins* uses orchestral cues to clue you in to the state of the union. "The music A.I. is constantly monitoring events in the empire that help it decide how things are going," Fraser says. "If the A.I. decides not much is happening, it will switch to a neutral piece; if the coffers start filling and you own a number of planets, the music will switch to something more inspiring.... My favorite is when the A.I. predicts that an enemy is going to be attacking you soon; this will trigger a 'trouble is coming' piece."

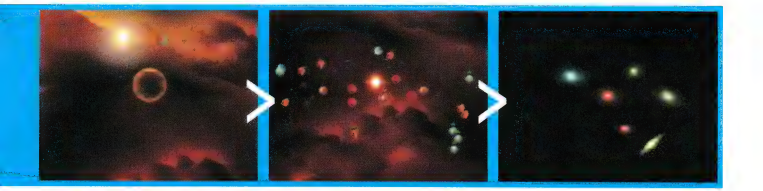
SPLITTING ATOMS

One could easily argue that any RTS game already contains the four Xs in 4X strategy games (explore, expand, exploit, exterminate)—so if *Sins* isn't turn-based, what's the difference, really?

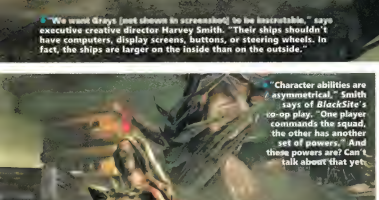
Fraser defines the nexus point: "Most RTS games tend to play out in much smaller environments; a typical RTS 'map' might encompass what could be a couple territories in a world-domination 4X game.... The pacing in *Sins* is less hectic than in most real-time games; there are clear opportunities to manage various parts of your empire—when ships are traveling between planets, they enter Phase Space and can't interact with the rest of the galaxy, so you don't have to worry about them for a moment."

Enemy extermination is often the only means to victory in an RTS, but *Sins* offers alternatives: "The research trees are much larger than those of most RTS games; we've included numerous levels of diplomatic relations between empires, and players have a number of alternatives to develop their economy and acquire resources." One such alternative: Work *Sins*' intriguing bounty system.

"Players place a bounty by opening the diplomacy window and clicking the bounty button for a given opponent," Fraser explains. "As players destroy ships and structures of that enemy, they receive money from the pool proportional to the value of what they destroyed." The design goals: Provide an in-game incentive for cooperation against a clear "powerhouse" opponent, and offer an alternative for economy-focused players to deal with military-minded enemies. The names of the bounty placers are kept anonymous. "This can lead to some interesting psychology between players," Fraser says. "To what degree can I trust that my ally isn't using income from our trade agreement to put a price on my head?" **Sean Molloy**



"We want Greys [not shown in screenshot] to be inscrutable," says executive creative director Harvey Smith. "Their ships shouldn't have computers, display screens, buttons, or steering wheels. In fact, the ships are larger on the inside than on the outside."



"Character abilities are asymmetrical," Smith says of *BlackSite*'s co-op play. "One player commands the squad, the other has another set of powers." And these powers are? Can't talk about that yet.

BLACKSITE: AREA 51

Extraordinary rendition

PUBLISHER **Midway** DEVELOPER **Midway Studios Austin** GENRE **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE **Summer**

PREVIEW

1950s sci-fi held a mirror to postwar paranoia. Commies became invading body snatchers; irradiated bugs mutated into atomic monsters. Fast-forward to *BlackSite: Area 51* and executive creative director Harvey Smith, who says that the first-person shooter needed "something resonant, characters and a campaign relevant to current events." So what scares us nowadays? For a franchise that defined tavern furniture (lightgun and digitized graphics included), *Area 51*'s answers are surprising.

Weird weather, the specter of global warming, and secret rendition sites where the U.S. government imprisons and interrogates suspected terrorists are more or less *like* modern myths, Smith argues. "We've talked about how to handle such situations without trivializing them," he says. "The concept is the connecting thread here—U.S. soldiers dealing with a crisis brought about by hush-hush, underhanded activities conducted down in Area 51. In today's political climate, and in light of current activities abroad, it becomes an interesting lens through which to examine the world."

Heady dilemmas and Smith's résumé notwithstanding (he worked on *Deus Ex* and its sequel), *BlackSite* is largely gun smoke and killing. "*Deus Ex is* different," he says. "[It's] slow-paced, an RPG hybrid with stealth play. *BlackSite* is a purer first-person shooter. Of course, I'm constantly comparing and contrasting the two, and part of me wants to model the game in great detail, down to the contents of each and every desk. Warren Spector and I have talked about how we'd approach a spiritual sequel to *Deus Ex*, assuming we work around the tech problems that plagued us with *Invisible War*. But for *BlackSite*, we want a perilous, fast-paced experience, a destructible environment, and a squad that functions as a deadly and flexible tactical weapon."

In addition to *Brothers in Arms*–variety bounding, squads respond to one-button, context-sensitive commands such as "hoist one another up and over this fence" or "mount that Humvee." For Smith, however, what troopers do is only as noteworthy as how they handle what's done to them. "We want the intensity of a combat situation to influence the mood of the squad members," he says. "When morale is high, the squad is more aggressive, fires more often, and more accurately. When things are going to hell rapidly, they tend to enact the military rule of 'CYA'—for 'Cover Your Ass.'" Roger that, but then we gotta wonder if "Game Over, Man" isn't the better response to unknowable ETs whose mere presence undermines our grip on reality. ● **Shawn Elliott**

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NVIDIA

CERTIFIED

1994
Produced the music for Blizzard's Prince of Persia–style 2D platformer, BlackThorne.
A1
1994
A busy year for Bill: He also produced, performed the voiceovers, and did the documentation for WarCraft: Orcs and Humans.
B2
1995
Who needs sleep? WarCraft II: Tides of Darkness comes out a year after WarCraft's debut.
C3
1995-1997
WarCraft II expansion (in 1996); serves as producer (and much more) on the time-sucking Diablo.
D4
1998
Produces StarCraft, which explodes onto the RTS scene. The same year, serves as executive producer of Brood War expansion, one of the best examples of how to follow up on a game's success.
E5
2000
Serves as senior producer on Diablo II, destroyer of any free time PC gamers might have had. The breakthrough skill system it introduced still appears in games today, including Company of Heroes.
F6
2003
Key employees from Blizzard North (the group that worked on the Diablo games) leave to form Flagship Studios; Bill serves as CEO.
flagship STUDIOS
G7
2007
The year of Flagship's Hellgate: London? We sure hope so.
H8

THE GFW INTERVIEW: BILL ROPER

Having one hell of a good time BY DARREN GLADSTONE

INTERVIEW

GFW: With *Diablo*, your team shook up traditional role-playing game mechanics. Since then, how do you think that RPGs have evolved?

BILL ROPER: Well...there was that period when a lot of action-RPGs came out and had some interesting spins on the *Diablo* formula. More recently, some good—no, great—single-player RPGs have come along. However, it just feels to me like everybody's more focused on the MMO space. *World of WarCraft* is pretty much the ultimate version of the *EverQuest*-style MMORPG. So, when I hear that someone is trying to make a "*WOW* killer," I can't help but think it's a fairly foolhardy pursuit. The guys that I'm watching are the ones that ask themselves, "How do we make a game that taps into those elements of the MMO experience but provides a different type of gameplay?" And there have been varying levels of success with that. *Auto Assault* is great because it's got a lot of the same elements, but it's completely different at the same time. I wish more people checked that one out.

GFW: How many elements do you borrow before you become just another "*WOW* killer" wannabe, though?

BR: Obviously, that's going to vary depending on the gameplay. The developer needs to make [the elements] fit the game in a unique way that makes sense. In *Hellgate: London*, we're tapping into a lot of the community and the economy stuff that's really popular, but it's more based on the *Diablo* mechanic. Our hope is that everybody that played *Diablo II* is going to give *Hellgate: London* a try. And then maybe some *WOW* people are gonna say, "Hey, that looks kinda cool. I want to try that out." And we'll get some *Oblivion*-type players, 'cause they know they can play the whole game by themselves; they don't have to go online if they don't want to. Or maybe we'll get some *Battlefield 2142* guys who want to come over and try out the Hunter class and the FPS style of play.

GFW: Another big trick is making the game simple to control. The *Diablo* series, for example, was as simple as point-and-click hack-n-slashery. How do you deal with *Hellgate* possessing three incredibly different play styles?

BR: I think that one of the huge advantages of the PC is that we have a very detailed input device with the keyboard and the mouse. Very simple with the mouse, and very sensitive. I think that a lot of developers get enamored with the fact that they have a keyboard—"Oh, man, I've got a button for everything!"—and you get these ridiculously complex interfaces.

Developers need to stop. They need to be OK with making a simpler, more intuitive interface. I don't wanna play a game where I need a keyboard overlay. And that's something we work on constantly with *Hellgate*. Can we simplify this? Can we make this easier? We really think we can make the jump to using the WASD keys to move. To not just use the mouse like we did in *Diablo II*. Enough games have come out and helped standardize that rubric. Peoples' hands kind of immediately go there. PC users like the mouse; they like the keyboard. And we always ensure the user interface doesn't get overcomplicated unnecessarily.

GFW: So it doesn't make you want to throw up your hands and say, "Screw it! I'm gonna use a Wii controller from now on!"?

BR: It's kinda funny, because the controllers are going the other way. I mean, look at a controller from 10 years ago, and think of an Xbox 360 controller now. You've got two thumb joysticks and buttons and shoulder triggers. They're just saying, "How can we put, ergonomically, more stuff right here?" Then you start playing with a Wii. I started to understand you could delve into more what we think of as traditional real-time strategy games on a console. I could actually drag and click with this remote, because it simulates more closely that finite control that you have with a mouse. So maybe there's something to what you're saying. The potential is definitely there.

GFW: But you're still sticking to making PC games, right?

BR: *Hellgate* is a PC game. It needs to be with the connectivity that we have, the access to different resolutions of graphics that are much higher, and so on. One of the things we're working on right now is determining whether or not we're going to integrate a web browser directly into *Hellgate*. Since the game takes place in the near future and the Internet exists, why not let them pull out the in-game PDA and search our knowledge base for clues? Or hit the forums? It's a way to keep you in the game world and get you there without having to Alt-Tab out of the experience. And that's something that makes more sense on a PC than a console. We are still the platform with the single biggest installed base of any gaming system out in the world. And now Microsoft is actually pushing it as a brand with the Games for Windows initiative, which is only a good thing. The real core, geeky PC gamer in me hates the fact that they're standardizing boxes, but I understand it and see how it's gonna be good for PC gaming.

GFW: Gonna miss the cloth maps, collector's coins, and such?

BR: I'll miss the weird-shaped boxes. I really love that stuff. Maybe they'll let us make collector tin versions or a triple-deep box so we could fit cool things inside.

GFW: What, like a little rubber demon in each box?

BR: You never know. I mean, [Peter Jackson's] Weta studio is designing our collectible figures....

GFW: What is it with you guys having demon-slaying in almost all the games you've worked on, anyway?

BR: They're the perfect villains. No one ever complains because you're killing demons. If you kill other humans in the game, then people say, "You're creating murder simulators!" I've never had a demon-rights activist come to me and say, "The poor demons in the world...." They're patently evil. They're nonhuman. They are obviously fantasy creatures. They...actually, now that I think about it, I wonder if there *are* demon-rights activists.

GFW: You never envisioned *Hellgate* as a kind of spiritual sequel to *Diablo*? It seems like this very well could have been *Diablo III*, just set in the near future. After all, Electronic Arts has no problem placing *Battlefield* in the year 2142.

BR: After the first *WarCraft* and when were talking about *WarCraft II*, there was an idea for about a week where we'd open another portal open and have the Orcs invade the modern-day world. We had this whole cut-scene we were talking about where it was going to be dragons and F-16s and firefights and stuff. And we were like, "Man, that's going to be weird. That's going to suck. That's not going to be *WarCraft*." We decided that the *WarCraft* universe *is* that medieval fantasy-type setting. We weren't going to jump out of that timeline. Same thing with *StarCraft*; we were never going to travel back in time. And we never really wanted to move the *Diablo* stuff, either. You can play with settings, you can play with time and stuff, but you never want to take the *Diablo* universe into near-future America or something.

But we do like fighting demons. And it lets you be really creative with designs. And, because we set *Hellgate* a real-world place, it let us do a lot of research into the mythology of interesting locations...London, Ireland, Scotland....

GFW: ...Maybe even Hoboken or Cleveland.

BR: Exactly!

GFW: Speaking of foreign lands: In Korea, you're pretty much hailed as a national hero. Why do you think South Korea, of all places, has absorbed PC gaming into every aspect of its culture?

BR: Internet cafés never really took off here like they did in Korea because many of us have computers and broadband connections at home. To them, PC bangs [internet cafés] are like bars—it's very social. No, they're more like Starbucks. There must be about 25,000 of these places all over the country, each one with 40 computer stations.

GFW: It's more than that, though: In Korea, there are televised game competitions; gamers are recognizable professional athletes; there are even national programs sponsoring games. >

"DEVELOPERS NEED TO STOP. THEY NEED TO BE OK WITH MAKING A SIMPLER, MORE INTUITIVE INTERFACE. I DON'T WANNA PLAY A GAME WHERE I NEED A KEYBOARD OVERLAY."

BR: Right, and this all started when the South Korean government went around to all these PC bangs and said, "Look, if you're going to have all these games in here, you're going to have to actually buy the copies; you can't just dupe them on everything." And suddenly, for the first time, developers in the U.S.—and certainly Blizzard with *StarCraft*—started seeing actual sales numbers coming out of this market. We always knew the games were popular, but never really got any revenue out of them. Again, you got some, but when 10 percent of your games are paid for, you have no idea what's really there. As the sales numbers rolled in, the private sector and the government started realizing the same thing: "Wow. This is a very thriving section of our economy. Kids want to go do this; this is where they're spending their money that they have to spend." So the government viewed it as an excellent way to kick South Korea into the technology age. They recognized these rabid, avid gamers existed, and at that point, *StarCraft* just became this cultural phenomenon, this huge hit.

GFW: That must've messed with your head the first time you went over to Korea. Just to see how much impact a game had.

BR: You're not kidding! I went and toured some of the PC bangs back in 2000, when there were maybe 1,500 in the country, and a big bang might have 20 computers. I met this woman who owned one and she was almost in tears, saying "I own three PC bangs. I employ 40 people." Because this had all taken off, and a lot of it because of *StarCraft*, it was creating jobs. It was creating communities. And so they opened up the Korean Professional Gaming Association, World Cyber Games, and they found big corporate sponsors like Samsung. They make sure game-design classes are available in schools.

The thing that really blew me away was going over there to watch a televised tournament live. They had the two teams on each side, a big screen in the middle, and there were probably 150 kids jammed in this PC bang in a mall. And when they introduced the players, they had chants; they were screaming for them. They have fan clubs. I mean, they're sports stars over there. PC sports is huge!

The South Korean government has done an amazing job of getting behind the game industry. They built this center in downtown Seoul—high-end motion-capture studios, music facilities for sound design—they had all these really expensive things that you want to use when developing games, and they rented them out really, really, *really* inexpensively to dev companies. It costs almost nothing because that's how the government is helping support people get into gaming. I just think it's awesome. I really wish that more governments would look at that as a model and say, "This is a great way for us to tap positively into gaming for the youth."

GFW: It'd certainly be a lot better than most governments that are currently demonizing it.

BR: Yeah. In the U.S., we're finally starting to see the educational sector taking gaming seriously. We're starting to see different schools opening up game education programs, everything from DigiPen to [Southern Methodist's] Guildhall to Carnegie Mellon and now the [University of Southern California]. Now videogames have been around long enough that we can start teaching techniques to other people. They just need to be on par with our film schools—another similar form of entertainment.

GFW: Time for a word-association game: *StarCraft: Ghost*.

BR: Unrealized potential. I really loved the idea of that game—and, you know, it just didn't happen.

GFW: And no *StarCraft II* after all this time? That's just mean.

BR: Hopefully, Blizzard still has plans for the *StarCraft* and *Diablo* universes. But it's really hard to argue with the success and the hunger that is the *World of WarCraft* monster, you know? It requires a lot of manpower.

GFW: Is that what it is? The whole company is just focusing on online at this point? Is that why you left Blizzard to pursue *Hellgate: London*?

BR: Well, we left, and that's all there is to it. However, I can say that the way Blizzard works is interesting. They've got three amazing franchises—*StarCraft*, *WarCraft*, and *Diablo* are all fantastic. The one thing that was always a challenge—and one of Blizzard's greatest strengths—is that focus on all of the creative powers on tap. And so, you know, when *World of WarCraft* was getting closer and closer to ship—not that we were there by that point anymore, but based on past experience—I'm sure that became the major focus of all the minds there. Now they're faced with the fact that *WOW* is an MMO and an ongoing concern. So it's hard within the way that Blizzard runs—and very, very successfully runs—to then say, "OK, great, now let's split that beam and move to the other stuff." I really hope that there's a *StarCraft II* and a *Diablo III* and a *Ghost* and a *World of StarCraft* or whatever.

GFW: If they ever do a *World of StarCraft*, I'm just checking off planet. I'm done.

BR: That's the thing, too. Everybody talks about how amazingly rich *World of WarCraft* is—and [the original game] was an RTS. I think they can take those franchises and do whatever they want with them. If you build a big, fun, believable world that players want to get lost in, you can do many different things with it. We're trying to do that with *Hellgate*. And, if I've learned anything, it's that people working on any big, ambitious project in the future need to start thinking that way as well. ●

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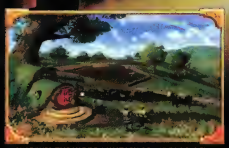

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■ **All that twisty foliage doesn't mean you'll be dancing on the ceiling or popping through real-time loopholes. "We won't be including any changes in gravity, wall walking, or anything along those lines," says Nelson. "But the dungeons are truly epic, with new traps, puzzles, and creatures specifically designed to challenge the most hardcore *Oblivion* players."**

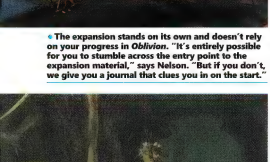
■ ***Shivering Isles* is shaping up to be everything you'd expect from an *Oblivion* expansion: new creatures, spells, weapons, armor, ingredients, and plenty of lovingly scripted, sprawling quests. Adds Nelson: "We're including a bunch of new books written for the lore buffs out there, and the answer to one of the biggest mysteries in *Elder Scrolls* lore will finally be revealed!"**

SHAKE, SHIVER, AND ROLE(PLAY)

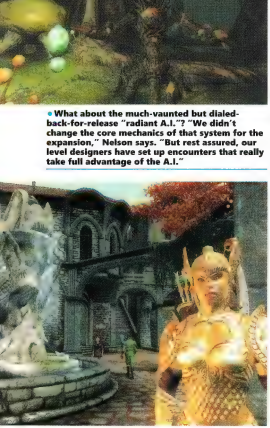
Bethesda loses its marbles with *Shivering Isles*, the expansion for *The Elder Scrolls IV*

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **Roleplaying** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**

• **The expansion stands on its own and doesn't rely on your progress in *Oblivion*. "It's entirely possible for you to stumble across the entry point to the expansion material," says Nelson. "But if you don't, we give you a journal that clues you in on the start."**



• **What about the much-vaunted but dialed-back-for-release "radiant A.I.?" "We didn't change the core mechanics of that system for the expansion," Nelson says. "But rest assured, our level designers have set up encounters that really take full advantage of the A.I."**



PREVIEW

Scan shots from Bethesda's *Shivering Isles* and you'd be forgiven for blurting jargon like "brillig," "mimsy," and "Bandersnatch." "Goodbye idyllic climes," tease the screens. "Hello madness, mirth, and Jabberwocky." Talk about trading spaces. Gnarled landscapes bend back upon themselves and tree roots dangle from cavern tops while strange three-legged stick creatures scuttle, crab-clawing and probing the air with alien eyestalks. Elsewhere, coiling rainbow-colored foliage nestles below towering mushrooms, each one collared with tiny bulbs—a psychedelic version of *Morrowind's* Bitter Coast region where iridescent celestial objects paint the night sky in heliotrope slashes over backplanes of starry silver. Welcome to Dementia and Mania, psychotic and sublime halves of "madgod" (or is that "maddog"?): Sheogorath's realm, and your new playground when the official expansion for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* hits this spring.

"WE'RE ALL MAD HERE."

As if grappling with the Prince of Destruction wasn't enough, Sheogorath—the Daedric Prince of Madness—needs a hero. "Basically, there's an impending threat to Sheogorath's realm, and because of the nature of that threat, he needs a mortal's help," explains *Shivering Isles'* lead designer Mark Nelson. "Players will need to rise in the ranks of the Court of Madness in order to earn the respect of the citizens of the Shivering Isles and eventually repel the threat."

Adolescent power fantasy redux? Maybe not. While Nelson admits you'll still engage in a healthy amount of "find this" and "kill that"—"Let's face it," he argues, "*The Lord of the Rings* was really just one big FedEx quest."—the ambience sounds delightfully demented. "The 'creative' and 'psychotic' themes gave us lots of room to create interesting characters with sometimes bizarre motivations," Nelson says. Meaning that, while ticking off your checklists untangling conspiracies and rebuilding broken artifacts, you'll be dancing toe-to-toe with some of the looniest clucks in *The Elder Scrolls* coop.

Then there's the whole "special trials and powers" thing. "You'll need to complete Sheogorath's first trial just to enter the realm," Nelson says. Thereafter, you'll be intermittently asked to prove yourself worthy to serve as Sheogorath's champion. As you progress, you'll be granted some of the mad god's powers. We're not sure what they are, but we're pretty sure a deranged deity won't be diddling around with "magic missile."

"The main thing is to keep the experience engaging," Nelson says, outlining a design philosophy that keeps things A-to-Z but jumbles up as much as possible between. "That is, if I have to get something, are there interesting ways to do it? Can I persuade a guard to let me in? Can I sneak in behind a servant? Are there obstacles in my way that are unlike what I'm used to seeing? As long as the player can make meaningful choices along the way, there's nothing wrong with questing for a sword or lopping off some heads."

> "LET'S FACE IT," SAYS LEAD DESIGNER MARK NELSON. "*THE LORD OF THE RINGS* WAS REALLY ONE BIG FEDEX QUEST."

ISLE OF STYLE

How big are the Shivering Isles? According to Nelson, Sheogorath's madcap realm adds roughly a quarter more real estate via its own pinched-off plane. "The realm of *Oblivion* comprises many different planes of existence—each of the Daedric Princes has his own," Nelson explains. "In *Oblivion*, the player was only able to explore one (Mehrunes Dagon's plane). The Shivering Isles is another plane belonging to Sheogorath." But where Dagon's plane was fragmented and often randomly generated, Sheogorath's Shivering Isles is one contiguous land mass. "It's a completely new world, with settlements, a major city (New Sheoth), large regions of wilderness, and many residents."

And don't forget the whole "bizarro *Elder Scrolls*" theme. "*Alice in Wonderland* was definitely one of the inspirations," Nelson admits when quizzed about the expansion's quirky aesthetic. "The lands of Mania are bright, vibrant, and colorful. It's quite a departure from the woodlands of Cyrodiil, and we wanted to evoke a bit of that Lewis Carroll feeling." Dementia, Mania's twisted twin realm, is by contrast dark, dank, and "a bit spooky." "Those areas have much more of a horror theme," he says, adding that the plants, creatures, and architecture in Dementia will be appropriately creepy.

Creepy indeed, thanks in part to critters named "Flesh Atronach" and "Shamble." "One of my favorites is the Grummite," says Nelson. "They're a race of creatures that infest the Shivering Isles, found in many of the dungeons where they gather to worship strange idols." They're smarter than the average bear, too: Semiaquatic, they'll often run toward water to heal when damaged. "Trust me," Nelson says. "It's much better to fight them on dry land." Or, if the spirit of Monty Python moveth thee, run away! • **Matt Peckham**

• Developer Peter Stock says he only started work on *Armadillo Run* around mid-2005, when he had a convenient opportunity to give it a full-time go. "I initially gave myself six months to have something marketable to show," he says. "Out of the gate, development was focused on creating the physics engine, and it was really only after that seemed achievable that I started to think of a game concept."

ARMADILLO RUN

Roll it, wing it, chuck it, fling it!

PUBLISHER: **Self-published** DEVELOPER: **Peter Stock** GENRE: **Physics-Based Strategy/Puzzle** AVAILABILITY: **Demo and commercial version downloadable from www.armadillorun.com**

PREVIEW

Park your eyes at Canadian indie developer Peter Stock's website (www.armadillorun.com), and—with all its shots of stuck-together metal sheets, rockets, and rubber bands—you can't help but wonder: Why armadillos? "Well, an armadillo is one of the few things I could think of that was conveniently spherical," he reasons, adding: "Some girls I went to school with had a thing for armadillos, too."

And plenty of critics as well. In fact, Stock's physics-based puzzler *Armadillo Run*, in which you craft oddball contraptions out of rudimentary materials premised on basic Newtonian principles to transport an armadillo across a series of levels, was just nominated for the Independent Games Festival (IGF) 2007 Seumas McNally Grand Prize. That's the one U.K. indie darling Introversion nabbed in 2006 for *Darwinia*.

IF YOU BUILD IT...

Remember that crazy gate opener in *The Goonies* with balls and buckets, bellows and balloons? Think that, except with gravity-bound armadillos. "I played *Stair Dismount* (http://jet.ro/dismount) and *Bridge Builder* (http://www.bridgebuilder-game.com) back in 2001," says Stock. "Those games were something new to me—they employed realistic physics, which I'd never seen before. There's so much you can do with physics, but I didn't really see many people exploring this."

Thus, in 2005, Stock began drafting the nuts and bolts of what would eventually become *Armadillo Run*. "The physics rules aren't really that complex," he admits. "It's more a case of programming them in a certain way to make the simulation a bit more scalable. The rules I used are basically the definition of Newtonian physics: force = mass x acceleration and conservation of momentum and energy."

While it's fairly simple to get Stock's roly-poly armadillo from A to B in the demo maps, the catch is this: You accrue more points for spending less on building materials, and the maps require increasingly expensive solutions. "I chose the seven materials because I felt they best represented the elementary properties," explains Stock. "Rope and cloth are flexible, metal bars and sheets aren't, and elastic and rubber are stretchy/compressible. Each of these pairs contains one material that's placed at the edge of the structure and one that's placed in the center. I included rockets because they have the special property of propulsion."

Rockets, he says. Eat your heart out, Rube Goldberg. **• Matt Peckham**

GAMES FOR WINDOWS® IGF 2007 HOT PICKS

AQUARIA

DEVELOPER: Bit Blot (San Francisco, CA)

DESCRIPTION: You're finally a lonely mer-creature with a hazy past. Paddling through beautifully hand-drawn 2D underwater locales like hidden caves and lost ruins (using nothing but a five-button mouse), your goal is to uncover the history of Aquaria and "connect with beings lost in the depths of time."

AVAILABILITY: Full PC version due in 2007.

URL: www.bit-blot.com

BANG! HOWDY

DEVELOPER: Three Rings Design (San Francisco, CA)

DESCRIPTION: Hang-ins howdy, *Bang! Howdy* is an online tactical strategy game set in the wacky Wild West, cartoon 3D style. Battle as a character and challenge friends. Using teams of units with unique abilities in various combat scenarios (think *X-Com* Star), and earn cash to buy new units, avatars, and special-ability cards.

AVAILABILITY: Full PC version downloadable from developer.

URL: www.bangnowdy.com

EVERYDAY SHOOTER

DEVELOPER: Queasy Games (Toronto, Ontario, Canada)

DESCRIPTION: According to developer Jonathan Mak, Everyday Shooter is "like a music album, except instead of having a collection of songs, it's a collection of shooters." And with groovy Steve Reich–inspired guitar riffs!

AVAILABILITY: Full PC version due in 2007.

URL: www.everydayshooter.com

ROBOBLITZ

DEVELOPER: Naked Sky Entertainment (Los Angeles, CA)

DESCRIPTION: Powered by no less than Unreal Engine 3, RoboBlitz is "a humorous, physics-based action game full of inventive puzzles, explosions, and environments. Players take on the role of Blitz, a self-assembled robot who must activate an ancient Space Cannon in order to save his world from a band of maladjusted space pirates."

AVAILABILITY: Commercial version downloadable via Steam.

URL: www.roboblitz.com

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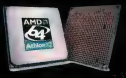

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File Front

As you're reading this, it's coming up on my most hated day of the year: Valentine's Day. Twenty-four lousy hours dedicated to a beheaded priest...or a brutal mob hit in 1929...or the incessant need to give cheesy Hallmark cards to someone who barely tolerates your existence. I'm sensing a pattern here. But in the fine spirit of this—*ahem*—"holiday," I probably need to show some appreciation to the one that I love. She's a little on the big side, and she isn't pretty in the conventional sense, but she's always there for me. Ah Sophie, we've been together for what, 10 years now? You've stuck with me through it all despite the bumps, bruises, tears, and occasional daytime talk show.

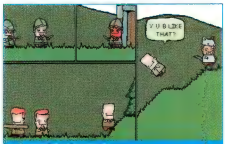
That reminds me: I *really* need to get her reupholstered. What? Oh, like you don't love your sofa? But as much as I adore her—and adore loafing around the apartment—I adore looking for great free games even more. Here are a few I'd like to dedicate to my dear, sweet Sophie. **–The Freeloader**

THE GAME: **Mop of Destiny**
FILE UNDER: **Cleaning House**

There's a soft spot in my miserly heart for all the real working men out there. They have all the crap jobs I wouldn't want—like, say, saving the world. But really, would you want the fate of the world to rest in these slack hands? The Palace of Westminster janitor who stars in *Mop of Destiny* is about as enthused about his chosen-one status as I would be, but too bad for him—he's stuck with the job of sopping up evil spirits with his magical mop. Aside from the sanitation angle, the big draw of this 2D side-scrolling actioner is the *Out of This World*–y graphics and animation.

THE GAME: **UFO: Alien Invasion**
FILE UNDER: **X-(Com) Rated**

Our planet has a near-perfect record of repelling invasions from Earth-dominating aliens—so you'd think those extraterrestrials would just move on to less ambitious plans. Just take Fresno. Go on, it's cool. Anyway, I can sum up *Alien Invasion* in two simple words: 3D *X-Com*. Simple as that. Some dedicated gamers lovingly re-created the classic alien-busting, turn-based strategy game in a 3D engine. Research technologies, build bases, and engage in tactical squad firefights in the field against Earth's interstellar foes. If you haven't started downloading this yet, I'm banning you from next month's column.



THE GAME: **The Boomlands**
FILE UNDER: **A King and His Castle**

The next time you see a game that requires 5GB of hard drive space, a videocard from the future, and a supercomputer's worth of RAM (I'm looking at *you*, Mr. Million Dollar megadeveloper), think of *The Boomlands*: I tell ya, it's crazy that you can fit this much fun into under 3MB. Here's a 2D real-time strategy game that looks good, is easy to pick up, and is just damn fun—and it's funny, too. You simply plunk down structures to defend your castle against the enemy king and his troops in this perfectly balanced version of ye olde rock, paper, scissors, where each of your units has a unique role.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY: MARCH 2007

High noon in PC gaming's Wild West

THE GOOD

***EVE ONLINE*: NOW MORE ACCESSIBLE**

CCP's underdog space MMO *Eve Online* continues to maintain its quiet-yet-successful existence. The new *Revelations* expansion—which CCP is deploying piecemeal over the next several months—provides a much-needed overhaul for the game's tutorial and early-game experience. The upgrade gives new players a much better idea of what their character creation choices mean, and also provides newbie characters with more skill points, meaning that they can get to the "good stuff" that much faster.

THE BAD

***FIREFLY*: THE MMO**

While it isn't technically bad news, let's just say we have a bad feeling about Multiverse's upcoming *Firefly* MMORPG, which spins off from writer/director Joss Whedon's fan-favorite (and short-lived) sci-fi/Western show. While *Firefly* and its big-screen sequel *Serenity* rode on the strength of Whedon's writing and characterization, the setting itself amounted to a generic sci-fi universe...and since Whedon's busy with his next two film projects (*Wonder Woman* and *Goners*), his participation here's sketchy at best.

THE UGLY

PERPETUAL DOWNSIZES

As part of 2006's joyous holiday festivities, *Gods & Heroes* (an upcoming MMO) developer Perpetual Entertainment laid off a whopping 35 employees. Perpetual president Chris McKibbin said the following in a press release regarding the restructuring: "The *Gods & Heroes* team remains over 80 talented people strong as we enter the final phase prior to launch—playtesting and tuning to deliver the highest quality game possible." Yeah, well, Merry Christmas to you, too.

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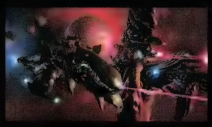
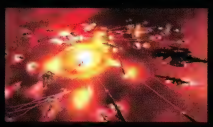


Morph your armada in real-time with powerful upgrades.



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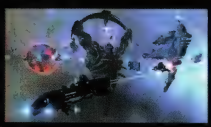

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RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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● **Fifteen years later, Tequila still packs a pair of pistols and a truckload of bullets.**

JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD

God of Guns

PUBLISHER **Midway** DEVELOPER **Midway** GENRE **Action** RELEASE DATE **Spring**

PREVIEW

Hong Kong cinema nerds who kneel at the altar of director John Woo and action star Chow Yun-Fat can look forward to more of the pair's trademark gun fu in *John Woo Presents Stranglehold*, Midway's upcoming Woo-directed videogame sequel to the 1992 cult-classic film *Hard Boiled*. Players step into the world of hard-nosed police inspector "Tequila" Yuen, a role that Chow reprises here in digital form (expect a de-aged avatar of the 51-year-old actor that closely approximates his original film appearance). As you can imagine, our dual-gun-toting hero Tequila's a man on a mission—and the third-person gameplay's got *Max Payne* written all over it (right down to the "Tequila Time" slow-mo mode), as Tequila pursues his abducted ex-wife from Hong Kong to Chicago.

We recently took a peek at a few of the areas Tequila visits during his search. The dev team's working hard to showcase the game's physics, as evidenced by the eminently destructible environments and the scores of enemies that the often-outnumbered Tequila tangles with. One level—a Hong Kong marketplace—allows for immense destruction, thanks to a large neon sign that you can gun down in order to take out the no-good thugs (and everything else) down below. Another encounter in a Chicago-based museum finds you using the exhibits to your advantage—running up the back of a giant T. rex or swinging across the room on a colossal pterodactyl in search of better vantage points. Finally, a Chicago penthouse level is decorated with breakable glass windows, fragile art sculptures, and multiple floors that you can quickly traverse via Tequila's trademark banister slide.

> "GOOD GUNPLAY AWARDS "STYLE POINTS" THAT YOU CAN EXPEND TO UNLEASH "SMART BOMB" MOVES.

These types of fancy cinematic maneuvers (and good gunplay) award "style points" that you can expend to unleash any of several balls-to-the-wall "smart bomb" moves on your enemies. Take, for example, Tequila's barrage move, which sprays a rapid-fire hail of high-velocity bullets toward a single concentrated area. Yep—even after a 15-year absence from active duty, Tequila still knows how to give those gangsters hell. ● **Ryan Scott**

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GOLD-FARMING DOCUMENTARY
Intriguing, taped-in-China documentary unlocks a MMORPG sweatshop's doors.

***HALF-LIFE 2* WITH WII-MOTE**
MacGyver jury-rigs Windows to work with the Wii's waggle stick (see Hard News, pg. 107).

***WORLD OF WARCRAFT*: LEVEL UP**
Trash-talking MC records *WOW*'s, what, 187th rap video?

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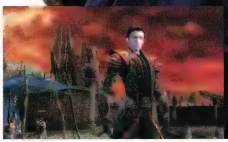
INTERVIEW

With over 3 million sold, ArenaNet's three massively multiplayer *Guild Wars* games—*Prophecies*, *Factions*, and last October's *Nightfall*—just keep gaining momentum. We recently sat down with executive producer Mike O'Brien, lead designer James Phinney, and designer Isaiah Cartwright to discuss where the game's been—and what sorts of challenges await it going forward. ● **Ryan Scott**

GFW: How do you guys feel about the game, nearly two years postlaunch?
JAMES PHINNEY: I think—certainly—we feel that the game keeps getting better. It's a *fun* game; all of us enjoy playing it. Those are the most fundamental successes from a designer's standpoint—you hope the thing that you've made is fun, and that people enjoy it, and that *you* enjoy it. So, in that regard, we're pretty happy. At the same time, as a designer, you *always* see all the flaws, and hopefully we don't have complete tunnel vision about that stuff.

GFW: What specific things do you want to address that you just haven't gotten around to yet?
JP: Well, it's always dangerous to talk about specific things when I don't know *when* they're gonna get fixed. There are [some] really exciting ones we've done for *Nightfall*, though. The initial play sequence—the flow for characters jumping over from [*Prophecies* and *Factions*]—wasn't as smooth as it could have been. For instance, you hit a spot early on where it's asking you to have a pretty high-level Sunspear rank [to move forward]...and just due to time, that part of the



● ***Guild Wars Prophecies***

● ***Guild Wars Factions***

● ***Guild Wars Nightfall***

AFTERTHOUGHTS:

A roundtable discussion on *World of WarCraft*'s biggest competitor

game just wasn't quite as polished as it should be. So, we changed that part so that if you're already a level-20 character, it lets you move forward even if you haven't earned all those Sunspear points. But in addition, part of the problem is that we should have had more content up front to familiarize you with your NPC heroes and to sort of introduce you to *Nightfall*'s setting. So, we also added some pretty significant quests and early-game content for foreign characters that are coming over for the first time.

MIKE O'BRIEN: One of our ongoing challenges is, once you've shipped a game, it becomes more difficult to go back and reengineer some of the fundamentals...and yet, I think that we can do a lot of that—changing the way the party formation [system] works is a really big example of that. We don't have to live with the design decisions of the past; we can continue to make the game new and fresh.

GFW: Do you have plans to go back and change the mission structure of the original *Prophecies* campaign to put it in line with the tiered reward system that the latter two campaigns use?

MO: We work really hard to *not* go back and redo some stuff in previous chapters, because—whenever we make fundamental [balance] changes—we always risk going back and completely changing the way *Prophecies* plays. And really, we're *not* trying to do that; we're trying to keep releasing new campaigns that play in new ways but still keep the old campaigns playing the way they felt when we released them. At the same time, we're really happy that features like *Nightfall*'s NPC heroes get to impact the gameplay and sort of give you new ways to play *Prophecies* and *Factions*. I think it's fantastic that people can go back and play those campaigns with two players and six heroes.

JP: Just talking to the point in general about learning from the past: Some of it is about fixing things that are already out there, and some of it is about doing a better job. As happy as I was with a lot of the things about *Factions*' Assassin and Ritualist professions, for example, I feel like we did a better job with *Nightfall*'s [Paragon and Dervish] classes—having them both fit into what we did in the campaign, and also giving them a stronger place in the PVP environment.

ISAIAH CARTWRIGHT: The new professions also integrated a lot better into PVE. I think the Assassin and the Ritualist had a harder time going through the *Factions* campaign, whereas the Paragon and Dervish seem core to the way the game plays in *Nightfall*. So when we come up with new classes and things, we always want to keep that in mind.

GFW: Do you foresee the game world getting too big? With 20 to 30 new town areas per campaign, things could get spread thin....

MO: That's one of the major challenges that we have to address as we continue to ship content: making sure we put intelligent systems into place so that there *isn't* an overwhelming proliferation of things that a player has to learn. We can't have an unbounded number of skills, professions, and other things. As a new player, if you come into the game and don't know all these things, then you're just not gonna succeed. It would be terrible if *Guild Wars* only increased in complexity year after year.

GFW: Ditto for classes—when's enough enough?

MO: In broad terms, I think that new classes are a fantastic way to keep the game fresh. One of the things that a lot of players look forward to is new classes—when we release campaigns, the first thing you always see is that *everybody* wants to play the new classes. At the same time, we understand that it can't be the case that if you go into PVP, you have to understand the strengths and weaknesses of 20 different classes in order to succeed. That would be an untenable position—so that's exactly the kind of thing that I'm talking about when I say we have to really focus on introducing new content without continuing to increase complexity.

GFW: Let's talk a little bit about the state of *Guild Wars*' PVP. How happy are you with it?

IC: Overall, I think we're a lot happier with it than we were with *Factions*' release. We've gotten to see the new classes [in *Nightfall*] come into play a lot faster than we did [in *Factions*], a lot of the new skills had a really positive impact on the metagame, and competitive play's gotten [much healthier].

GFW: One common complaint is that *Guild Wars*' PVP caters to "über" guilds. Will we ever get anything more accessible to smaller groups?

IC: As we move forward with competitive play, we realize that our current system is catered toward a small group of elite players. We definitely want to expand that, and the things that we're gonna move toward will probably help bring a lot of our game types to a wider range of people. But in general, PVP is a very group-oriented thing, and I think it'll always be that way. We added the new hero battle mode [with *Nightfall*], which is really geared toward players who want to do some solo PVP play. We know that we need to add some more rewards to that to keep it popular. As we move forward, I think those are the two areas that we're really going to want to focus on.

GFW: Now for a few rapid-fire mechanics-related questions. First up: item drops. Let's be honest—any equipment drop without near-perfect stats goes straight into the junk pile. Why not make more item drops meaningful?

JP: It's certainly been true in the past that loot drops are, a lot of times, pretty uncool and not something worth getting excited about. We certainly don't want every item to be the best item you could ever get...but at the same time—especially when you're in the Underworld or somewhere like that—you don't want to see a useless weapon drop. So, you know, those are things that we'll keep looking at as we notice the areas where loot still has problems.

GFW: Will players ever be able to de-customize weapons and sell them to other players?

MO: Customization exists as a mechanic to get weapons out of the economy. I'm sure you can understand why we need to [do that]—we don't want an infinite number of every cool weapon in the game. From the beginning, we built mechanics to drain every sort of item from the economy. Players often don't perceive the design reason behind that—but, at the same time, I still think it's a pretty important reason.

GFW: Speaking to *Nightfall*'s hero NPCs, are you ever going to up the limit on how many you can bring with you in a group? Why limit it to three?

MO: From a control aspect, even three heroes is a lot to manage. Also...well, let me put it this way: The game communicates in the way that it expects to be played. When the game says the limit is three heroes, what it's saying is "play with two human players and six heroes," or "play with more than two human players." So, I think we looked very carefully at what the game communicates to players, because we see the players basically playing it that way. If it communicated that it should be played with one player and seven heroes, then players wind up playing the game solo, which is a really complicated way to play.

It also doesn't incentivize social behavior. One of our big movements for *Nightfall* was to create an environment where people get to know each other. In *Prophecies*, the game communicated that the right way to play is to get a full eight-player party—and [in that scenario], it's really hard to connect with anyone and to make new friends. What ends up happening is, they all run ahead as fast as they can and kill monsters and don't coordinate their actions...then you complete the mission and never see each other again. We're trying to find the happy balance.

GFW: Your hero NPCs enjoy access to every skill you've unlocked, account-wide. Why don't new role-playing characters have this same access?

JP: That's something we've talked about a lot. It's just a debate about whether or not it destroys your sense of them as actual characters, or destroys the value of the role-playing character having "been around," and being differentiated from, say, some brand-new guy.

MO: I think this debate is valuable to talk about. As with any online RPG, a lot of different types of people play *Guild Wars* for different reasons. So we think about radical proposals like that, and go around to our coworkers and friends who play the game and ask, "How would this impact you?" This specific proposal is one of those things that...to a *Guild Wars* [power player], it's a cool idea. But other players might say "that would completely destroy my experience," because to them, they're playing from a role-playing perspective. It's one of those things where we have to be careful—we can't take actions that make the game a little cooler for some people, but completely destroys it for others.

GFW: All right, last question. Are we ever going to see Gwen—the little girl who presumably dies in *Prophecies*' Searing—again? You had a few unexplained Gwen-related items in that game....

JP: All I can say is that we like Gwen, too. But other than that...no comment!

GUILD WARS

• Characters are outfitted with specific gear to further distinguish their "roles" in the squad. And the new weapons? "The one we're excited about is the RX4 Storm, basically a gas-operated, lightweight, supersexy handler," GRIN creative director Ulf Andersson says. "It's your new 'signature' gun, and with the ARGO system, which improves cycling and reliability, it's known for being as lethal as it is practical."

• You hated *GRAW*'s punitive save system, and Ubisoft listened. *GRAW2* reworks the save system to offer unlimited saves whenever, so long as you're not in combat.

• In addition to sound and voice, the enemies now have more expressive contextual animations, though we're not betting on "needs to change shorts" just yet.

• Multiplayer's basically getting more modes, though things aren't quite final—but count on *GRAW* classics like co-op campaign mode and team deathmatch, 32 players at once, and voice-chat support, plus a new "Recon vs. Assault" mode that sounds enticingly like a jazzed-up version of *Splinter Cell*'s "Spies vs. Mercenaries."

BORDER GHOSTS

Ubisoft sticks with Mexico, changes the rest in *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2*

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **GRIN** GENRE: **Tactical Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Spring**

PREVIEW

Grab your carbines, Glocks, and SMGs and suit up for border duty down Mexico way, where near-future civil war's bled across the Rio Grande, turning desert flats and mountain vistas into flak fields and bullet belts. That's right—you're finally getting up and intermittently out of the city in *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2*, which packs in new desert and mountain terrain accurately based on areas north and west of Mexican metroplex Ciudad Juárez. Peer back past the river at the Franklin Mountains arrowing in from the north and you'll note they nearly split sister city El Paso, Texas in two.

"The new topography combines long sight lines—interesting for sniping—with different relief that offers unique cover opportunities, even hollows for hiding vehicles," says creative director Ulf Andersson of Sweden-based developer GRIN. "In this sort of terrain, if you want tactical advantage, you control the roads." Ready for wide-range, sand-blasted, high-elevation combat? You'd better be.

BORDER FREE-FOR-BRAWL

GRAW2 may take place along an immigration hot zone, but don't go looking for Texas "minutemen" or "border security" missives. "The game isn't about the current political situation and doesn't have objectives that reference it," Andersson says. "Rather, we're using the geo-political situation as overall context." Basically, things have collapsed across the border—civil war between Mexican loyalists and rebel insurgents—and it's up to you as ever-able Captain Scott Mitchell to lead your squad of recon elites through missions that'll send you angling over both sides of the fence in a bid to neutralize the rebel threat.

But first you'll need upgrades. Visually arresting with larger levels than the Xbox 360 version, the PC *GRAW*'s urban structures were pretty facades—gawk, don't touch; shoot, don't enter. Ambiance was two-tone (night or day) and "leading" fellow ghosties usually meant babysitting boneheads. GRIN hopes to change all that in *GRAW2*. "For starters, the A.I.—enemy or allied—can now scout, infiltrate, and fight in buildings," Andersson says, noting that it's not just for show—the A.I. now thinks in 360-degree sweeps. That means top-to-bottom flanking—both sides—with improved A.I. feedback that's timely and descriptive. Instead of "enemy spotted," in other words, now you'll get specifics like "next to blue car ahead." But what about encounters—are they still fixed-point triggers?

Yes...and no. Think *Rainbow Six Vegas*—tripwires that conjure tactically volatile free-for-alls. "The dynamic events in the missions rely on the enemy A.I. behaviors," Andersson explains. "Depending on the situation, the A.I. can decide to change position or maintain its tactical advantage over your squad. At the same time, scripting certain events allows for a more powerful storyline to create a better overall immersive experience."

Consider tactical acumen, which in *GRAW* tended to result in squaddies zigzagging point to point or hanging their hunkered backsides out in the wind. "The team A.I. this time around is more direct and moves where it's ordered, unlike *GRAW*, where teammates made their own decisions regarding cover and attack positions," Andersson says. "By giving players more control, we've also increased the responsiveness and location awareness of the A.I. soldiers."

Combat fidelity's been jacked as well, including new ways to wall-lean and peek around corners (another bow to *Rainbow Six Vegas*?). "Overall, we've tried to let the player really interact with the team and see them respond to their surroundings instantly," says Andersson, describing new twitching motions that highlight your teammates' reactions to incoming fire, explosions, and noise. It gets better. "We're also adding different sounds and animations to the character models to help players identify how those characters 'feel' in a given situation."

And how do we feel about all this? Bring it on. ● **Matt Peckham**

RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 MARIOOOO!

If you're wondering what's the big deal with indie-existing XNA Game Studio Express, here's what: *Super Mario War* (http://smw.72dpiarmy.com) is a lot of *Super Smash Bros.*-ish fisticuffs that you can play on your PC—or soon on the Xbox 360.

2 WII HACKS

Scored a Wii for the holidays? Here's a fun but *way* nerdy trick: Hack the Wii Remote to replace your mouse. OK, it's not perfect, but if you have a Bluetooth adapter and need to kill an afternoon, flip to this month's Hard News (page 107) to find out how.

3 PRESTIGIOUS

There's no business like show business. In *The Prestige* (now on DVD), two competing magicians in Victorian England get into a bitter—and dangerous—rivalry to see who's best. Hugh Jackman (minus claws) and Christian Bale (sans bat cowl) do an amazing job in this Christopher Nolan (*Memento*, *Batman Begins*) flick.

4 WTF?

At first, we thought this had to be a joke—a professional league of riding-lawn-mower racers?—but the U.S. Lawn Mower Racing Association (www.letsmow.com) is no hoax. Hang your head extra low when buying the PC version of *Lawnmower Racing Mania 2007*.

5 GAMES IN FERRARY?

February is usually low tide for PC gaming, but not this year—by now, you're probably preoccupied with *Battlestations: Midway* and a little something called *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade*. Maybe we'll be playing *Supreme Commander* before you know it.

6 FOR FREEDOM

Nerd alert: DC's premier superhero group gets a makeover in this relaunched *Justice Society of America* series, which pays homage to just about every legacy hero, from The Flash to the original Red Tornado. (Bonus points if you knew her as Ma Hunkel.)

7 WIMPY MUSIC

Normally, we turn you on to underground hip-hop, mind-melting rock, or some trendy emo music. This time, we get sucked in by Susan Cagle. Between the ramblings of NYC subway cars, her catchy tracks hypnotized jaded commuters. Listen to *The Subway Recordings* and you'll understand why.

8 FINE WHINE

The notion of a British woman whining out hip-hop may sound a bit strange, but try Lady Sovereign's new album, *Public Warning*. You'll hang on the lyrics that drip from her English drawl in tracks such as "9 to 5" and "Blah Blah."

9 ON DISPLAY

The eternal question: Do I go on that next 20-man dungeon raid or get into an ebay bidding war over that limited-edition Ninja Turtle bust? Why not do both? The Portalian External LCD Display kit plugs into your USB port and displays all sorts of data. It'll even support your own custom apps. Gal 149 to love? Hit www.thinkgeek.com.

10 WEEKDAY WARRIOR

A shout-out to Cut Corner Company Productions (students at Southern Methodist's Guildhall) for this inventive *Half-Life 2* total conversion. You're Doug, the office loser with the overactive imagination. Part adventure, part *Office Space*, part *Metal Gear Solid*, *Weekday Warrior* is good for a laugh—and worth a free download from http://students.guildhall.smu.edu/~weekdaywarrior.

PIPELINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

FEBRUARY 2007	PUBLISHER
Dead Reefs	DreamCatcher
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	SOE
Jade Empire: Special Edition	2K Games
L.A. Street Racing	Groove Games
Maelstrom	Codemasters
PureSim Baseball 2006	Matrix Games
The Sims 2: Seasons	Electronic Arts
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
Supreme Commander	THQ
Test Drive Unlimited	Atari
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
War Front: Turning Point	CDV Software
MARCH 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Age of Pirates: Captain Blood	Playlogic Games
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
CSI: Hard Evidence	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	Ubisoft
Marine Sharpshooter III	Groove Games
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
Silent Hunter 4: Wolves of the Pacific	Ubisoft
Silverfall	Deep Silver
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	THQ
Two Worlds	TopWare Interactive
APRIL 2007	**PUBLISHER**
BioShock	2K Games
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	Ubisoft
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight Software
Shadowrun	Microsoft
SPRING/SUMMER 2007	**PUBLISHER**
Alone in the Dark	Atari
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
Crysis	Electronic Arts
Frontlines: Fuel of War	THQ
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	Stardock
Great Invasions	Strategy First
Haze	Ubisoft
Interstellar Marines	Zero Point Software
Soccer Fury	NCSoft
Surrender? "Nuts!"	Kudosoft
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
Thesis	track7

PC GAME OF THE YEAR

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Pardon us for just one moment as we indulge in one sentence's worth of breathless, cheerleading hyperbole: *Though every year is a good year to be a PC gamer, 2006 was even better than all those other years put together!* OK, we feel icky now. Also, it's probably not true, especially when you look at, say, 1998, which might truly have been the Best Year Ever—the year of *Half-Life*, *StarCraft*, and *Grim Fandango*.

Still, 2006 was a strong year for the PC, even with much of the spotlight stolen away by big console launches. And though there wasn't one massive *World of WarCraft*–type grand slam, there were still solid games for every genre, single- and multiplayer, all year long. And how do we know this? Because we just spent way too much time whittling down all our favorites of the year to just the Top 10—which we present to you here, along with our 1UP Awards for special achievement in innovation, multiplayer, and 10 other categories. We can practically guarantee that one of your favorites didn't make the cut. But, hey, that's what awards like this are for: To celebrate the year's great games *and* to piss you off! • **The editors of *GFW***

XTRAS

1UP AWARDS

Once you've seen our top PC picks, hit http://Revi1eF2006.1UP.com to see what the community thought. Then, go to GFW04.1UP.com for a special "Worst of 2006" edition of the GFW Radio podcast.

1UP NETWORK

GFW AND **THE 1UP NETWORK'S**

2006 GAMES OF THE YEAR

Tracing the titles and trends that shaped 2K6

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Still the only MMO that matters

10 Before you fire off an angry e-mail reminding us that *World of WarCraft* came out two years ago, let us just say 1) we know and 2) we actually could've made a very strong case to stick this one in the No. 1 slot. You simply can't deny that *WOW*'s influence and domination of the PC-gaming scene continues unabated—it's the title that many, many gamers played and enjoyed the most in 2006. And for good reason, too, as Blizzard continued to show how to properly support and maintain an massively multiplayer game with massive content updates (including Ahn Qiraj and Naxxramas) that kept addicts going even when they swore to themselves they were going to quit. And hey, how many games get their own dedicated *South Park* episode? For that milestone alone this year, *WOW* makes the list *again*.

GUILD WARS: NIGHTFALL

Play it your way

9 *Guild Wars*' biggest 2006 contribution doesn't mean much in a global sense—though the game continues to get props for its wildly successful subscription-free online model (there are currently at 3 million players and counting). *Nightfall*'s added content does mean a heck of a lot for existing *GW* players, though: The customizable NPC heroes effectively turn *Nightfall*'s campaign into a massively single-player RPG, forcing you to rely on other players only as much as you care to. It gives you the freedom to play *Guild Wars* exactly the way you want. In today's *World of WarCraft*–dominated MMO space, *Guild Wars* stands as one of the few contenders to fully and successfully carve out its own slice of the pie, and *Nightfall* is a huge part of that.

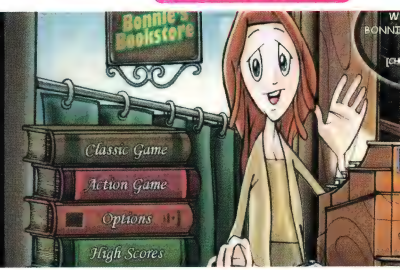
QUIRKIEST GAME BOOKWORM ADVENTURES

GMR Lex the bookworm strikes down his foes with the fury of an English teacher. We're fond of comic games, but "word game/RPG" (the bow of Zyx given you a bonus for spelling words with X, Y, or Z in them) is a new one. And a good one.

BONNIE'S BOOKSTORE

Don't take it casually

8 *Bonnie's Bookstore* stands out from the casual-gaming pack not just because it's a great game (and it is—word games don't get much more fun) but because of its pedigree: It was designed by Phil Steinmeyer, the game developer behind more "hardcore" PC games like *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Railroad Tycoon II*, *Tropico*, and more. Treason? No. Simple intelligence is more like it. The casual market is exploding, and Steinmeyer's move may just herald a return to gaming's roots: Virtual one-man-band projects like *Bonnie's Bookstore* give creators back the control they lose when multimillion dollar budgets and big publishers get involved. And the limited budgets mean they have to focus on what really matters: the gameplay. It's only a matter of time before a "casual game" becomes the biggest game of the year for hardcore and non-hardcore gamers alike.



TRENDS

7 big changes in 2006

THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE

This is the year we stopped feeling sorry for MMO developers who toss their next fantasy grind as the "*WOW* killer." Sorry folks—there's no such thing. Starry-eyed entrepreneurs took *WOW*'s success as a sign that MMOs were an infinite wellspring of real-life loot—and so they raped it with identical interfaces and ghost exclamation points. But the Dark Portal has proven to be a black hole, sucking up sure things (*D&D Online*) and unique ideas (*Auto Assault*) alike.

INDIE DEVELOPERS

Everybody loves an underdog, and in 2006, the little guys made it big. *Galactic Civilizations II* hit best-seller lists and *DEFCON* developer Introversion earned celebrity status. Creative and hungry devs are proving that being clever is more important that having a cool graphics engine or $million-dollar budget. And we suspect Microsoft's free design tool Game Studio Express will empower lots of would-be garage developers and pajama programmers.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

EA listens up

Electronic Arts' *Battle for Middle-earth II* is a remarkable example of what happens when a developer takes criticism seriously. The original *BFME* suffered from quirky design flaws: severely imbalanced heroes, intensely small unit caps, not-different-enough factions, and buildings in designated areas only. It resulted in an outcry from the hardcore RTS community, which EA took to heart—and channeled into *BFME2*, one of the best fantasy strategy games ever made. Sure, some of the "additions" like "build stuff wherever you want" aren't anything special—but taken in combination with a killer interface, far deeper gameplay, and EA's continued ear-to-the-ground design mentality (evident in the many fan-requested balance changes that the v1.05 patch implemented), it's a standout game in 2006's most standout genre.

ART DIRECTION: DEFCON

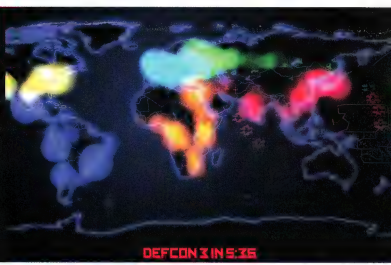
1UP says: Proving bigger and shinier doesn't necessarily equal better, Introversion went with "art-deco Day Glo" to decorate its war room and represent Armageddon—and that's a huge part of *DEFCON*'s appeal.

DEFCON

High tension

Sir Alfred Hitchcock once drew a line between surprise and suspense: Surprise, he said, is showing your audience some folks having an innocent chat, and then having their table suddenly explode. Suspense, on the other hand, is showing the audience there's a bomb with a timer under the unsuspecting folks' table first—and then placing a clock prominently in the scene for good measure.

The folks at U.K.-based Introversion must have read that interview with good Sir Alfred, because *DEFCON* is the most simply suspenseful strategy game of the year. The conceit: Build missile silos, subs, and other machines of nuclear war, and watch (and sweat) as the DEFCON level shifts from 5 to 4 to 3 to 2 to Apocalypse Now. The first time you see a circular burst of white and "SAN FRANCISCO, 4.2M DEAD," it'll leave you cold.



TITAN QUEST

The best action-RPG in six years

While the gaming world has spent the bulk of this decade frothing at the mouth for any signs of *Diablo III*, a score of wannabe "*Diablo* clones" have come and gone, all promising—and failing—to fill the shoes of the greatest of action-RPG series. So all hail *Titan Quest*, the first such game to actually stand on its own, thanks to a great setting (ancient Greece, Egypt, and China), a challenging and compelling skill system, and most importantly, an excellently balanced monster/loot reward system that, like *Diablo*, keeps gamers glued to their screens way too late into the night, hoping that one more dead monster equals that next coveted piece of epic armor. A solid first game from Iron Lore—if the folks at the company keep it up, they may someday get to hear games referred to as "*Titan Quest* clones."

SADLY IGNORED: AUTO ASSAULT

1UP says: As fun and unique as it is, NCsoft's car combat MMO's a pretty lonely stretch of highway—so lonely, in fact, that the game's multiple servers got merged together right after launch in order to combat the low population problem.

GAINING STEAM

Valve's digital-distribution service shot and scored in '06 with a lineup including Activision, Sega, 2K games, and PopCap's best (props for getting the splendid but underperforming *Psychonauts* off the bench, too). If such plays positioned Steam as the iTunes of PC games, support for indie darlings Introversion (*Uplink*, *Darwinia*, *DEFCON*) suggested Sundance Film Festival. And what's good for gaming is good for gamers: try-before-you-buy promotions, easy install/uninstall options, one-stop mod browsing, and a functioning friends list—at long last—amount to more than blowing smoke. What needs to happen next is trickier. Several publishers privately tell us they'd like to sell their digitally distributed software at reduced prices but fear being the first to "pull the trigger" on powerful brick-and-mortar retailers.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE

It builds character

One riddle resolved, three more to mull over—like TV's *Lost*, *Half-Life 2*'s premiere episode answers little and leaves us asking. As it happens, "who" and "where" are people we've befriended and places we've been. Time, however, has changed both, go-girl Alyx Vance included. That she helps more than she hinders is an A.I. accomplishment—that we care about her as a character is award-worthy. Neither queen bitch nor princess in need of hand-holding, she's something believably in between, resolute and shaken and self-reliant according to circumstances. And if Alyx benefits from the format's brevity and intensity, so too the filler-free action; every development feels fussed over, edited à la a director's cut—which, in a way, it is, with the inclusion of eye-opening (and optional) interactive commentary.

NARRATIVE

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE

Scribe Marc Laidlaw and the *Half-Life 2* crew carefully and cleverly made old environments interesting and an HFCC ally somebody to care about, all while not resorting to the usual "kicks" of the videogame storytelling trade.

LEVEL DESIGN

PREY

Floors are walls; walls are ceilings; up, down, left, right, forward, and behind are interchangeable in *Prey*'s gravity-agnostic, trippy turvy, out-of-a-kind levels. Dramamine not included.

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II

The little game that could

Stardock boldly went where few game-makers had gone in a long while when the company sold *Galactic Civilizations II* without any form of copy protection, which made it easy for us to play anywhere and extremely often—at home, during lunch at work, on the laptop riding the bus home. And through domino effect or pure happenstance, *GalCiv II* was the best-selling piece of PC software at Wal-Mart the week of the game's release, an unprecedented feat for what you'd generally peg as eggheaded space-opera nicheware. None of that, of course, has anything to do with the fact that *GalCiv II* is the single greatest 4X space-strategy game in eons, catering equally to warmongers who love building model ships and players who prefer to rule by convincing other cultures they simply *can't* live without your moon-tennis shoes.

INNOVATION

GARRY'S MOD X

Some mods are content to reskin monsters or add battle modes. This one grants you the power to mess with nearly every aspect of Valve's Source engine. Wild physics experiments, Vortigaunt dance parties—the sky's the limit, and then some.

TRENDS

7 big changes in 2006

MIDSEASON REPLACEMENTS

The October 2005 cover of *Computer Gaming World* exclaimed, "A new *Half-Life* every 3 months? Yes!"

No! Since "episodic content" was dubbed The Next Big Thing, the only major game to get its second act together is *Sam & Max*. *SiN Episodes* never got past its pilot; *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* is announced for nine months (or more) after *E1*. So far, "episodic" has proven no different from "expansion pack." Or "sequel." Or "vaporware."

STARFORCE FALLS

It was the kiss of death for any PC game in 2006: if StarForce was on the disc, many gamers refused to install it. Why? Because this insidious little piece of "copy-protection" software turned out to be malware in disguise, barking the CD and DVD drives of many unsuspecting gamers, despite the increasingly shrill and borderline-insane denials of the company who made it. By year's end, though, the word was out, and game companies were actively distancing themselves from it.

STARFORCE

Moby, the maestro of technology, is just one of the amazing independent artists you'll find at eMusic. Artists like My Morning Jacket, the Drive-By Truckers, Blind Willie Johnson, Chet Baker, Sufjan Stevens. Right now get 25 free songs just for checking out the site. And start shaking that booty.

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BATTLE SYSTEM
COMPANY OF HEROES

CHP Built on the squad ideals formulated in its *Warhammer 40,000* games, expanded upon with smartly dueling tech trees, and cemented with tense push/retreat node warfare, developer Relic nailed it in *Company of Heroes*.

COMPANY OF HEROES

King of the hill

Pan out and see Flakpanzers honeycombing parachutes; zoom in and gawk at tank shells glancing off Tigers. Bird's-eye, worm's-eye, *Company of Heroes* is candy, and something tantalizing happens when real-time strategy looks like a top-flight FPS; when GIs are more than meat for the macromanaged grinder; when the game earns its name. Drawing on lessons learned developing *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, Relic limits resources, distributing fuel, ammo, and manpower across an interlocking network and forcing Axis and Allies to fight at key nodes. Combined arms tactics are easy to execute and ultraversatile. Smarts (as in foresight to counter an opponent's tech track) tell the victors from the vanquished, and asymmetrical Axis and Allied forces guarantee that victories (and the genre) never look the same.

THE YEAR IN TECH

Fast cards and scrap metal

HARDWARE AWARDS

2006 saw the highest of high-performance PCs and the lowest of the "how high were they to design this junk?" lows. Can a $280 Killer NIC card really improve your online gaming performance? Not if it crashes your PC. If you build a PhysX card, will they come? Reply hazy—ask again when 1) the drivers are more robust and 2) some games (such as *Unreal Tournament 2007*) that use the technology actually come out.

2006 will also go down as the year Intel stepped back up to the plate and swatted a CPU home run out of the park. After years of being clowned by AMD, Intel proved itself with its Core 2 Duo processors—you no longer look like a gaming chump if your PC says "Intel Inside." But we all know PC tech moves fast, and while the Core 2 Duo processors are good, the potential in the upcoming quad-core CPUs is even greater. Intel's powerhouse processor just missed the window for best-of-2006 consideration—but when software heavyweights like Valve say that you won't see a major gaming performance boost until quad core, then you know they're onto something.

But our "Best in Tech" award goes to the most significant graphics card in years—the Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX. We've all joked about how big graphics cards are and how nobody has enough money to afford two for SLI (Scalable Link Interface) mode...but now you don't need 'em. This beast is as powerful as two 7900 GTX cards, and it eats benchmarks for breakfast. Not too shabby, considering it's cheaper and consumes less power than dual boards. It's also the first DirectX 10–ready graphics card, so that means you're one step closer to *Crysis*.

• The Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX represents the biggest jump in graphics technology in a long, long time.

TRENDS

7 big changes in 2006

STRATEGY RESURGENCE

In January 1999 we wrote—get this—a *30-page* feature on upcoming strategy games. Yeah, we know—that's almost as big as this whole issue. But in the past few years, the RTS genre had seemingly dried up, and nothing came out that we hadn't seen done a million times before. But 2006 brought on a full-blown resurgence—with innovative new game mechanics complementing the glorious new game engines. Strategy games dominate our Top 10 list here, and even more could be counted as easy "runners-up," including *Rise of Legends*, *Medieval II: Total War*, and *Star Wars: Empire at War*. Strategy games have always been one of the staples of PC gaming—this year, however, these staples happened to *kick ass*.

MULTIPLAYER EXPERIENCE
COMPANY OF HEROES

CHP Multiplayer as bang-dead gorgeous as any first-person shooter and as immersive, memorable, and long-lived as the real-time strategy genre's top guns—that's why we'll be playing *COH* well into 2007, too.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Thanks for the memories

We nearly just flipped a coin to determine our No. 1 and No. 2: No question, either *Company of Heroes* or *Oblivion* was the "Game of the Year." But when we tallied up our per-capita PC-gaming "moments," Bethesda's open-ended RPG wonder dominated our brain: Hunting for a lost painter, and then searching for him *in his painting*, oil-brush strokes and all; stumbling upon that secret hole in the ground that turned out to be the ancient ruin of a lost civilization just there, ya know, in case you felt like it; realizing that the crazy half-elf Glarthir just might be the only sane one after all—and then second- and third-guessing yourself until you're simmering in your own moral stew (looking for good videogame writing? Look here.); even just taking a moment to stand on a hilltop and see as far as the eye can see. No game made us say "awesome"—and *mean* it—as often as this.

But a game is more than just the sum of its minutes. *Oblivion* not only let us play *our* way, it rewarded us for it—and sucked up our nights, dominated our work days (counting the minutes until the clock struck 5), and commandeered our dreams as we planned out which Ayleid ruin to plunder next, rethought how we could have handled that half-elf differently, or plotted the countless ways we could completely avoid the main storyline and still have a ton of fun. It's also, like our past Game of the Year winners, one of the few games we can universally recommend to *anyone*—not just people who love RPGs but people who love games.

"WOW" MOMENT
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

1UP editor **Step outside the Imperial Cyrodiil sewers and squint through blinding sun, at the miles of woodland, stream-coursed vale, and alpine peaks that become your boundless playspace over the next 60 hours.**

DESIGNER OF THE YEAR
RELIC

1UP editor **Relic worked overtime in 2006, churning out both *Company of Heroes* and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade*, two of the best real-time strategy games ever. Hopefully *Dawn of War 2* is not far off.**

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

1UP editor **Bethesda said "play it your way," and they meant it. Be good, be bad, be a wizard, be a thief, be a good-bad-wizard-thief—be whatever the hell you wanted within the system's generous framework. Hell, you could even name your shoes.**

CULTURAL MOVEMENT
STEAM

1UP editor **We once handed Steam CGW's Coaster of the Year "award," pegging it as 2004's worst. Two years and a 180 degrees later, Valve's indie-enabling digital-distribution service is poised to change the way we get our games for good (see "Gaining Steam," pg. 59).**

MICROTRANSACTIONS

Get-rich-quick schemes. Love 'em or hate 'em, one of the murkier profit areas explored in 2006 (aside from in-game advertising) had to be microtransactions—paying "pennies" for dime-sized bits of extra content. The knee-jerk reaction of the PC crowd, used to its mods and patches for free, was apprehensive to say the least. But what started with paying real-world cash for some piddly in-game horse armor actually gained some momentum throughout 2006. The trick? Providing significant content for the money; more real quests in *Oblivion*, *Battlefield* booster packs—microtransaction content was more "episodic" than anything else that bore that moniker, and it smartly added extra life to games. The only fear we have stems from gluttonous publishers short-sheeting a game's out-of-the-box features to make people pay aftermarket markups.

FRONT
FUEL OF WAR

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON

LINES:

Former *Battlefield 2* R&D team tries to beat EA at its own game BY ADAM GLASSER

"**You know what I want?**" Frank DeLise, general manager of Kaos Studios, asks with a glint in his eye. "I want *Call of Duty* on crack. Seriously. I'm a gamer and my needs are *not* being satisfied. There's no middle ground in team-based multiplayer combat. It's either a bunch of guys running all over the map hitting control points or tightly structured teamplay—'I don't want to be the medic, but the team needs one.' I want more than a single-player bot match, and I'm sick of disposable single-player campaigns that have me die and redo missions a million times over. You've got games with either great single-player *or* great multiplayer...I want both!"

Is DeLise's rant the wired result of yet another all-nighter? Maybe, but the driving force behind *Frontlines: Fuel of War* feeds off that—and the crackling energy of his New York City home front. He's a man possessed, working with a 60-strong strike team that knows exactly what it wants: to make the best damn multiplayer *and* single-player FPS game out there. Oh, is that all?

While such a goal would make eyes roll coming from most peoples' mouths, it sounds perfectly plausible coming from DeLise—he's never one to sugarcoat the truth, and given his track record, if he says something's broken, expect to see something fixed.

Back in 2001, a group of modders dissatisfied with the state of shooters rallied around DeLise, formed a studio called Trauma, and set out to create their dream game. Within a year, *Desert Combat*—the mod that helped propel *Battlefield* to household-name status—was born. Since then, Trauma helped create *Battlefield 2*; EA acquired them; and they quickly quit en masse, refusing to buy into the superstudio mentality—and there was no way they were going to leave the Big Apple for EA's L.A. or Sweden offices. Afterward, Kaos was born.

Older, wiser, and ready for his team's first original project, DeLise believes *Frontlines* can beat *Battlefield* at its own game. And *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*. And *Call of Duty*. And *Unreal Tournament 2007*. And *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. And...well, you get the idea. >

BLOOD FOR OIL

Kaos is good at stirring hornet's nests. *Desert Combat*'s modern Middle Eastern missions came along just as America was settling into post-9/11 discomfort, drawing the attention of NPR, CNN, and gamers alike—but DeLise says it wasn't a ploy. "Back then, I wanted to play with modern military weapons, and nobody was making that [game]. It just happened to be strange timing."

So should we look for *Inconvenient Truths* within *Frontlines*? The game is, after all, about a looming energy crisis and the world war that follows. David Votypka, design director on *Frontlines*, denies that Kaos is trying to make a statement—instead, current events are making the statement for them. "From day one, we had two goals," Votypka says. "The first was to create a deep single-player experience. The second...was to get our hands on next-gen military equipment. And I didn't want to go sci-fi."

Before Kaos' computers were even set up in its offices, the team poured over stacks of books and newspapers. Here in the real world, Western troops drill in the Caspian Sea while a "NATO of the East" is forming (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). *Frontlines* builds from there. "Everything we laid out is extremely plausible speculative fiction," Votypka says. "Governments have known about these growing energy problems for generations—we just added bits that make sense in a desperate world 24 years from now." Call it Kaos' Theory, if you will.

Frontlines' extrapolates a bloody battle between Western Alliance (NATO, essentially) and Red Star (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, et cetera) forces. The team has drawn battle maps illustrating major events of the entire war, but according to DeLise, "the first game is a *tiny* little section."

And if *Frontlines* appears to vilify Eastern nations, that isn't Kaos' intent. "We don't have any political motivation," DeLise says. "In fact, we originally planned to create a whole campaign for the Red Star army as well. We just didn't have time." DeLise sees this is a perfect jumping-off point for a sequel if the franchise takes. (Spoiler Alert: *Frontlines* ends leaving the player in Russia; we'd bet 20 yuan that dealing with China in an expansion sets up a true sequel.)

SINGLE MULTIPLAYER

While making a great multiplayer game is certainly one of Kaos' goals, that part feels like a no-brainer—*Desert Combat* proved the team can knock out a solid map in its sleep. "For us," DeLise says, "the real challenge was finding a way to change single-player dramatically and try making a leap forward."

The day Kaos opened for business, they asked for the community's input—*GRAW* players, *Battlefield* clans, everyone. "After all," says DeLise, "they're the ones that helped us make *Desert Combat* so great. Game companies don't get that involved in the community until it's too late in the process to implement any of these ideas." The final recipe they settled upon: go-anywhere, do-anything action; remote-controlled drones; teamwork; and controlling the flow of battle to keep it fast-paced. >

Drones and tomorrow's soldiers—working together, they'll keep your Hummers running and gas under $4 a gallon. Make sure to grab that Drone Tech skill—then kick back and remotely control cybernetic minions while squatting safely behind a tank. To prevent you from churning out wave after wave of drones, a cooldown timer ticks down before letting you order reinforcements. And don't think they can defend themselves—if you're not controlling a drone, it's a metallic sitting duck.

The third rank of the Red Star Drone Tech skill is awesome—explosive, wheeled pets. In one multiplayer match we played, a Western Alliance tank was laying waste to Red Star forces. As soon as the radio-controlled bomb rolled down the street, the tank turned tail and rolled away. Nothing is funnier than watching a terrifying goliath flee from a whirring toy.

"EVERYTHING WE LAID OUT IS PLAUSIBLE SPECULATIVE FICTION."

—DAVID VOTH II, DESIGN DIRECTOR, HAWKEN DEV

UNIVERSAL SOLDIER

Mix and match skills to create an army of ones

CLASSES First, pick your weapon loadouts.

ASSAULT
All-purpose fighter with assault rifle, grenade launcher, pistol, and grenades.

HEAVY ASSAULT
Goon that hauls machine guns.

SNIPER
The camper: Aside from a high-powered rifle, you get proximity mines—the perfect interloper deterrent.

ANTITANK
Loaded with rocket launchers and land mines.

SPECIAL OPS
This stealth-tastic soldier uses silenced weapons and smoke grenades.

CLOSE COMBAT
Have Shotty, will travel.

ROLES Now pick your specialist job—and level it up in battle with XP.

DRONE TECH **Go on the tactical offensive with your robot army! Send out a recon drone to park over areas or arm assault units with rockets. Each side has unique approaches. The Western Alliance focuses on stealthy high-tech devices (its Rank-3 drone pthunks out mortar shells), while the Red Star army uses what amounts to lethally modded remote-control toys.**

AIRSTRIKE **For the less subtle blitzkrieg, start with an airstrike. Rank 2 calls in a gunship to clear an area. Rank 3? We're talking cluster bombs or, in the case of the Red Star, the Fuel Air Bomb. Oh, and in the single-player game, you'll be able to drop a tactical nuke. Nice.**

GROUND TECH **This is the all-inclusive support role, capable of healing, repairing, and setting up strong defenses. Erect machine-gun emplacements or mounted antitank rail guns for anyone to use. Repair vehicles and patch up people. So go on, lend a hand. Just remember that the adrenaline shot revives people *and* it's a handy way to give live foes a heart attack.**

COUNTERMEASURES **This tactical defensive skill lets you take out drones with EMP grenades, disable vehicles by using an EMP rocket, or call in an EMP pulse bomb that'll short out a city block. Tactical tip du jour: Fire an EMP rocket *near* a chopper. When it flails about defenselessly, follow up with a rocket, then just wait for 'em to say, "Wha happun?"**

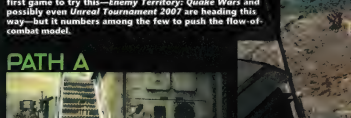
FRONTLINES EXPLAINED

The game's prologue crash-lands a helicopter behind enemy lines. It's the beginning of World War III, and the first shots are being fired at your head. Your mission: Survive, try to secure the fuel depots, and exfiltrate from "N1."

***Frontlines* starts small and quickly expands to include more objectives. First, you need to either take out a SAM launcher site or secure the armory—which direction you choose and how you accomplish either is entirely up to you. PATH A below presents one possible method for clearing your way to the SAM launcher site; PATH B shows how you might choose to take control of the armory.**

Once you've accomplished your first goal, the play field broadens. Just over the horizon on the monstrous starting map lies a motor pool (which grants you access to Humvees for direct assaults) and a huge series of oil pipes (for a stealthy insertion to the final level objectives). Accomplishing objectives pushes the concentrated battles toward a new specific area. This leads to an eventual tug-of-war as objectives change hands. *Frontlines* isn't the first game to try this—*Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* and possibly even *Unreal Tournament 2007* are heading this way—but it numbers among the few to push the flow-of-combat model.

PATH A



1 Want to get all tactical? No prob! The game *can* play a lot like *GRAW*—if you want.

2 All you need to do is get to a good position and pick away at those lousy reds from a distance.

3 Hey, dude, you mind? We're trying to take a screenshot here. Go on! Git!

4 Once you're in position, fire away—you lousy camper, you.

"It took a year to know if it even worked in single-player," DeLise continues. "We need the A.I. to use the environment as well as you will. With all the vehicles and destructibility, we want to make it feel like you're walking through a town, not a hallway. We're shooting for that *Call of Duty* intensity in a nonlinear world."

A *Call of Duty* sans scripted scenes? Since *Frontlines*' world is open, Kaos can't rely on trigger points to move events. There are start and end sequences, sure, and maybe a couple moments that vary as you try different approaches through a level, but most of *Frontlines*' triggered cues are aural. As a firefight erupts, the cracks pot down in volume while a *Black Hawk Down*–esque score washes in. The rest lies in the hands of the A.I. programmers.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

"One of the big challenges is having A.I. that intelligently reacts to the map and the player," says senior producer Joe Halper, and so A.I. and animation were top priorities early on in production. Kaos employs four A.I. programmers (including Chris Journey from Relic's *Company of Heroes* team) and a group of five animators dedicated entirely to A.I. animation. Among them: facial and A.I. animator Andy Grant, who helped create *F.E.A.R.*'s frightening and realistic enemy behavior.

You can already see the fruits of their labor. If the A.I. sees you move around a corner, it will cautiously hold position. If it suspects you're up to something, it'll circle around and try to flank. DeLise, Halper, and Votypka all drill home that there are no breathers or "safe spots" as in *Call of Duty*. (In *COD*, you know that a wave of Nazis will arrive the second you walk inside that church. Need a bathroom break? Just wait outside—no need to hit pause.) In *Frontlines*, the enemies actively look for you if they suspect you're in the area, moving from cover to cover around your last known position. And once they find you, they also know when to run back to defensible positions, protect objectives, and call for help. The A.I. communicates with both you and other troops the same way. Red Star soldiers talk to one another—and so does your division.

As we attempt a decidedly Rambo-ish approach in one playthrough, a nearby squad member sees an RPG in a building. "S***! Rocket to the left!" he yells. A second later, we hear the *kthunk-whoosh* of said rocket sailing past our position. It's not a canned comment followed by a triggered event—it's all A.I. interacting with the player on the fly. In the slow moments, according to Votypka, your A.I. squad could randomly check the status of the mission or tell stories. If only for a second, it feels like you're in the midst of a multiplayer match—or an intensely cinematic experience. That's the point.

Drawing inspiration from a number of sources (including *Aliens*, according to DeLise), your squadmates in the single-player game have distinct

5 This is kinda like the game's Wal-Mart. You see that Rocket Launcher on the wall? All mine.

4 One lousy guard left protecting the armory? You're kidding, right?

3 You know what? I'm just gonna keep walking down the street like I own the place.

5 Now that you've cleared out the enemy, you're free to take out that SAM site.

1 Stealth? That's for wussies. All I need is a flak jacket, a bottle of Jack, and a bazooka.

2 Got a gun emplacement to deal with? Toss a couple well-placed grenades. Problem solved.

personalities. This isn't just in-the-field chatter, it's also tactical. You don't really control the A.I., so trying to assault a motor pool from behind becomes an interesting experiment in how the CPU reads a situation. Rather than a frontal assault, we creep around the back. Two soldiers post up near the front while another trails behind our lead. Without any orders, the two up front create a distraction for our stealth kill shots from a flanking position.

Similarly, all the animation makes A.I. actions appear more believable. Soldiers struggle to pull themselves up onto platforms in different ways; they crawl, scramble for cover, and if an obstacle is in the way, they roll or dive over it. None of this is scripted, either—it's *Frontlines*' situational A.I. picking from a huge library of animations. To these perfectionists, though, the work's still not done.

INCOMING!

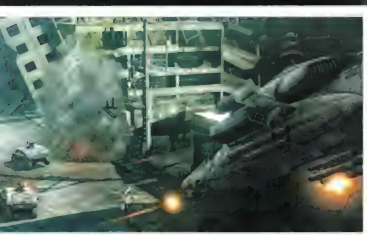
DeLise says that back in the *Battlefield 2* days, "We'd build stuff in and then playtest twice a week. Then we'd put in a huge new feature in two days, like [*BF2*'s] commander mode. So we'd build it, zip it, send it to Stockholm, play it. It was insane that we had all those things done in six months." The big lesson they learned—beyond how overrated sleep is—was iteration. "We'll make a game look like crap at first and play the hell out of it. The result is a tight game that plays well and will eventually look great when done. That's just the way it should be—gameplay first."

After playing one single-player theater of war, we jump online into a couple of the 10 planned multiplayer maps.

"Weed Whackers! Heads up!" The telltale sound of Red Star recon drones whirs overhead. Looking like toy choppers, but loaded with C4, they root out hard-to-reach snipers. Machine-gun fire from my tank turret takes one out. "Oilfield" is a large map (which we of course push well past the prescribed 32-player mark), so everyone jumps into the nearest vehicles. Humvees, tanks, choppers, antiaircraft—I never leave the cockpit. Still getting tweaked, the vehicles respond well enough for the moment. If you've played *Battlefield 2* or *Desert Combat*, the game already feels beta battle-ready.

Taking to the bombed-out streets of Moscow in the "Street" level requires a different approach. >

> "I LOVE CALL OF DUTY AND GRAW BUT I'M TIRED OF PLAYING THE SAME EXACT SCENARIO EVERY DAMN TIME."
>
> -FRANK DELISE, GENERAL MANAGER, HAZE STUDIOS



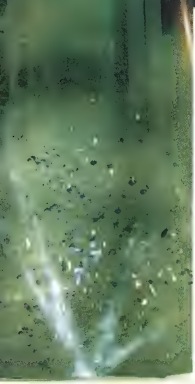
Lest you think this sweet screenshot (right) is some kind of smoke-and-mirrors render, may we present exhibit B: the reverse-angle shot of the same firefight (above).

"IT'S FUNNY. BUT THE SCI-FI TECH IN *ALIENS*—SECURITY TURRETS, REMOTES, AND SO ON—HOLDS UP TO WHERE REALITY IS GOING"

DAVID CUNNIFFE, DESIGN DIRECTOR, IMAGE STUDIOS

How do you make a modern soldier that doesn't just ape *GRAW*? Think Vietnam, but worse, where soldiers wear the taped-up khakis of their fallen comrades.

Now we get to see the genius of the layered combat role/weapon selections in action (see "Universal Solider," pg. 67), in which you score kills and secure objectives to earn role points. Earn enough and you go up a rank in your combat role. That leads to more abilities. In my first test, pairing the Heavy Weapons loadout and Ground Support role lets me machine-gun suppressive fire while patching up people and vehicles. *Frontlines*' philosophy: Just because you like healing folks doesn't mean you should be stuck with the lamest weapons. Assuming the Drone Tech role, I level up as a member of the Red Star army and score one of my favorite in-game moments—hiding amongst the



Most of the environment in the single-player game is fully destructible; in some cases, you can create your own path through a level. This tech was added on top of the Unreal 3 engine. Says senior producer Joe Halper: "When you see something like a tower explode in *Gears of War*, it's baked into the game's cut-scenes. Here, it's all calculated as you play," without the benefit of physics cards (though the game does support PhysX). Sandbags scatter, walls crumble, and wheels roll down the street. (Multiplayer is another matter. The team continues toying with strategic destructible points for online matches.)

rubble and sending out drones. It's camping for a new millennium!

As I flip through my different combat role options, DeLise turns and says, "The whole idea of a ranking system [as in *BF2*] is broken. It rewards players that jump in early and perfect game tactics with added abilities while it punishes people that start playing late in the game's life cycle." That's not the case here. Like in *Enemy Territory*, ranks gained in one mission reset with the next match. After all, it's only fair to start a multiplayer game on equal footing.

FORCED FEEDBACK

DeLise is still hoping to get a few more things into the game before its release. "Like intelligent in-game VOIP," he says. "If you get into a tank, the game creates a shared space so that, even if you aren't in the same squad, you can quickly speak with each other." Most of the other "to-dos" fall squarely in the postrelease content pile.

He'd love, for example, to get in a PC co-op mode for the single-player game. The game is already built to support it, but it will probably come in a patch. "We just want to have enough time to test it and make sure it is right," DeLise says.

"We're definitely big fans of the community," he continues, "and don't plan to nickel and dime 'em for extras. I can't promise that we won't charge for everything, but as a gamer, I feel that there is stuff that we need to do." Maybe a couple free maps, a couple weapons—something to give back to the fans. "Look at the *Battlefield* expansion packs. A $30 expansion with a bunch of good extra content makes sense. If it brings something new to the table, great. But a $10 booster with a couple 'eh' additions is only going to piss people off." Translation: Publishers should be giving that stuff away free. It's only going to help grow the community and, according to DeLise, "you're going to make your money by selling more games."

"Hey," DeLise interrupts himself. "What did *you* think of the game? Be honest," he asks, flipping the interview back at me. So in the spirit of Kaos' feedback-friendly design theory, here's my two cents:

Know your roles. The openness of how you select loadouts and combat roles is liberating, and more importantly, simple. More games should do this.

This drone's army. Arguably, one of the coolest things going is the ability to control drones. The units themselves feel balanced and uniquely appropriate for each army.

The dialogue is great. That's the handiwork of Votypka and Austin Grossman (*Deus Ex*). More interesting is the narrative device that explains the world to the player: a news reporter attached to the squad, contacting his network between missions to explain what's happening. During missions, however, he disappears, then magically escapes harm just in time for the end-of-level cut-scene. One humble suggestion: Get the newshound inside the game.

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

A huge amount of attention is on your buddy-bots; their animations need to sell the idea that you're interacting with individuals, not empty shells. These guys show emotion and slight hints of individuality; they sneeze, they clumsily pull up onto perches in different ways. But how different will it feel from other Unreal 3 engine games or *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*? Time will tell.

hiding behind cover and shouting out warnings. If done right, he could be the next Barney.

The "real" world. A big concern is how one can use the Unreal 3 engine, make a game with modern combat, and not have the soldiers come off looking like *Ghost Recon*'s advanced warfighters or "generic trooper number five." Votypka says, "Just because we have an IP that takes place with modern weaponry doesn't mean it's *GRAW*. This isn't squeaky clean." From the way the A.I. interacts with you to the look of the battlefield, it does stand slightly apart from the rank-and-file war games.

Your friend destructibility. It's already amazing what you can do to the game world. Blow up a Humvee and watch a flaming tire roll by. Deform defilades or blow holes in walls to create new paths to victory. The only potential gamebreaker is arbitrarily saying that one wall is destructible, but another isn't—though that's more likely to be a problem in the multiplayer game, since Kaos is considering just making breakable strategic points online.

Impressive openness. Granted, this was only the prologue level, but how one progresses is entirely up to the player. Whether rolling across the desert with Hummers or peering around every corner for head shots, the game accommodates your choice and, so far, the team A.I. behaves accordingly.

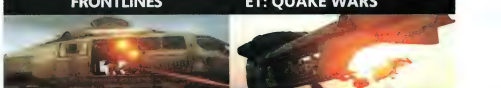
Live Anywhere. PC-360 grudge matches? Hell, the fact you can plug in a 360 controller to play is as good a sign as any. Kaos, pull the trigger and get Live Anywhere working!

Now playing. Striving to hit *Call of Duty* levels of intensity is tough without scripted sequences, but so far the little touches—like the dramatic use of audio and key moments of A.I.—can help make a single mission feel like a trailer for *Black Hawk Down II*.

"Thanks, I really appreciate all that," says DeLise—and he means it. After an intense day of demos and multiplayer firefights, he pauses, and breathes—maybe for the first time all day. "Man," he sighs, "I just hope that this game is great, we keep the players happy, and we get a chance to tell the rest of the story." We hope so too. Now go home, Frank. You've earned some sleep.

GRUDGEMATCH

How does *Frontlines* compare to similar FPS fare like *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*? Considering former mod teams author both games, let's find out.



FRONTLINES	ET: QUAKE WARS	ADVANTAGE
A.I.		
Big emphasis on A.I. in the single-player game so they don't feel like bots—they communicate with you and each other and act independently (but in line with level objectives). Folks from Monolith (*F.E.A.R.*) and Relic (*Company of Heroes*) are working on A.I.	None. All players are real players, so if you've got a beef with the A.I., blame the education system.	*Frontlines*
Single-player mode		
Eight theaters of war.	None.	*Frontlines*
Two different (but balanced) forces		
Some differences in skills and weapons, but effectively the same and balanced.	Asymmetrical forces that are perfectly balanced? Whoa. Aliens and soldiers impressively collided in our playtests.	*ETQW*
Line of combat/pushing objectives		
Combat pushes to a unified front, which can shuttle back and forth. No running around to points all over the map.	Ditto.	Tie
Unique weaponry		
All real-world near-futuristic gear. Just watch *Modern Marvels* on the Discovery Channel and you'll see half this stuff now.	A decidedly more sci-fi slant: Earth forces pack real-ish gear of the future while the Strogg are, well, unreal.	Tie (depends on preference)
On-the-fly objectives		
There are set objectives. You don't need to complete them in any specific order, but you do need to be at the front line.	Senses targets of opportunity so that, if you have the right gear, the server tells you where to go. Very n00b-friendly.	*ETQW*
Destructible environments		
Definitely in single-player, possibly strategic points in multiplayer. That is without the promised PhysX card boost.	While you can deform the environment slightly, no.	*Frontlines*
Good mix of skills/special abilities		
Four roles that level up in battle. Bonus points: being able to mix and match weapon loadouts with skills for more flexible play.	Each class on each side has some very cool, very unique abilities.	*ETQW* (slight)
Open, moddable environment		
Kaos recognizes the need for mods and fully intends to make *Frontlines* moddable. In fact, key mod teams will get an early hands-on for head starts.	Technically, it's possible, but even id Software's John Carmack says that it'd take pro-sized teams to create mods.	*Frontlines*
Live Anywhere support		
Very good chance of seeing Xbox 360 and PC players colliding online. We say, "Bring it!"	Not that it's a bad thing, but this is strictly PC territory.	*Frontlines* (slight)
Graphics		
An amazingly moddable Unreal 3 engine. What was originally intended for detailed enclosed areas gets buffed for huge outdoor battles.	Ditto. Overhauls the Doom 3 engine with buzzword du jour "megatextures."	Tie (for now)

XTRAS

Want more? Mix up http://vr1.1up.com/frontlines for more footage, exclusive screenshots, a guerrilla-style video tour of Kaos Studios' offices, and more.

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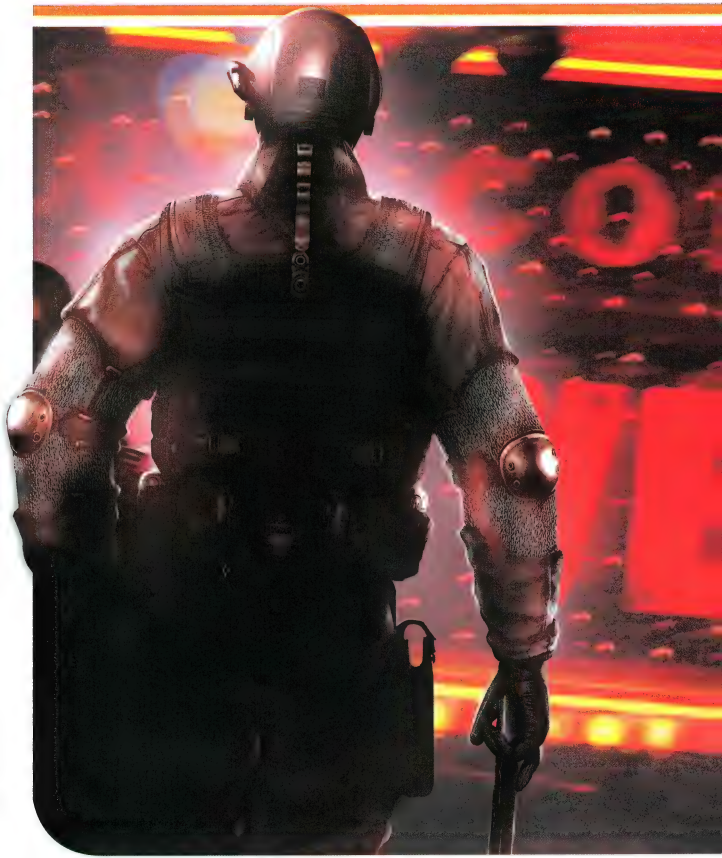
Reviews

Opinions you can trust



INSIDE

RAINBOWS

Rainbow Six Vegas

The once-great tactical shooter series bounces back.

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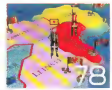

EUROS

Europa Universalis III

The game of every history nerd's dreams.

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WEIRDOS

Sam & Max: Episode 2—Situation: Comedy

Another 15 minutes of episodic fame!

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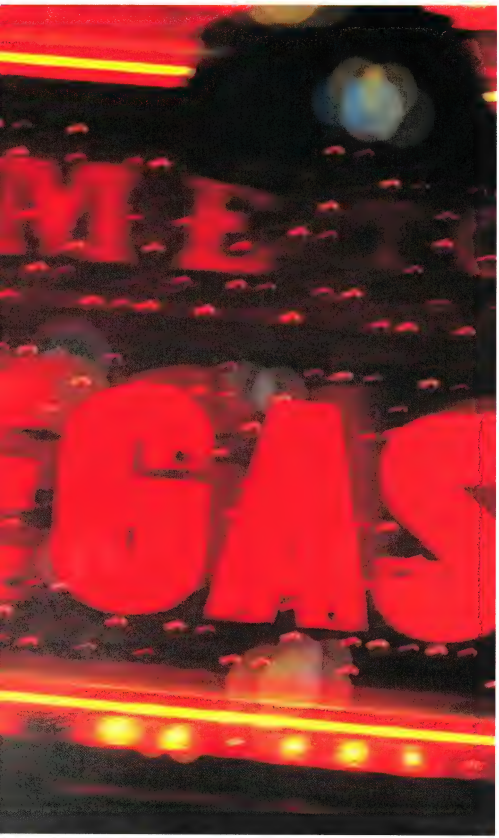


THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

At the risk of stating the obvious, we don't review every single PC game here at *GFW*. Plenty of circumstances factor into this: space constraints, editorial schedules, and freelance budgets immediately spring to mind. But sometimes—a *lot* of times—we don't review games because they simply don't fit our audience. Looking at retail sales data, plenty of demand exists for games like *Desperate Housewives, Paws & Claws Pet Vet*, and *SeaWorld Adventure Parks Tycoon 2*—but the audience for these types of mass-market titles (or, as we affectionately refer to them, "baby games") doesn't exactly overlap with our target audience for any number of reasons.

One such game, the Christian-themed RTS *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (based on the best-selling novel series), certainly isn't without its agenda. It's a game custom-tailored to draw criticism (and not the constructive kind), no matter how you look at it—either you're down with the idea (and undoubtedly already own the game), or you dismiss it as propaganda (and probably just want to see us...well, *crucify* it). Based on internal *GFW* play sessions, the review certainly wouldn't have been kind. So, really...who would we be serving by reviewing it? Answer: nobody. **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

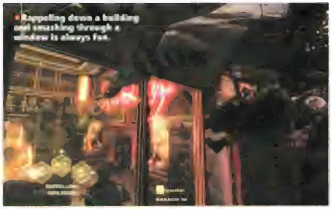
7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

In multiplayer, you really need to make use of cover and scan all elevations for bad guy activity.



Rappelling down a building and smashing through a window is always fun.

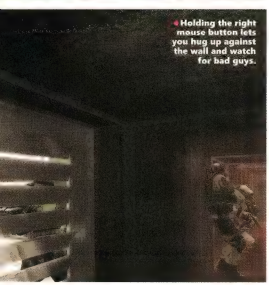
Directing your team is simple: Just point to where you want them to go and select what you want them to do when they get there. It's all done from the first-person view.

RAINBOW SIX VEGAS

Bright lights, big city

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal GENRE: Tactical Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

Fremont Street looks very Fremont Street-like...although it could maybe use some more people.



Holding the right mouse button lets you hug up against the wall and watch for bad guys.

REVIEW

For many, details of the single-player campaign in *Rainbow Six Vegas* are unnecessary. The existence of a robust, well-executed, four-player co-op mode potentially negates the need to ever dip into the single-player experience...and to ignore it is to deny yourself what is arguably *Vegas*' biggest contribution to the franchise. Whereas previous *Rainbows* were little more than well-designed skirmishes loosely hooked together in sequence, the new game centers around a story arc. While it's certainly not the most imaginative narrative, it brings the game a far greater sense of purpose and even takes a stab at some character development—albeit clumsily—by introducing a completely new Rainbow team and hinting at tensions between squadmates.

Surprisingly, the game starts in the deserted streets of Mexico City rather than amid the neon glow of the titular Vegas. Essentially serving as a prolonged tutorial, this first level is an unexpected way to kick things off, doubtlessly disappointing many players. Because of the presentation, the initial series of firefights feels more like a dumbed-down version of *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* than the more intimate battles we expect from *Rainbow Six*; thankfully, things evolve quickly, and by the time the action moves to Vegas, it's indicated that you're actually hunting a "bad guy"—and with that knowledge comes a singular sense of purpose. You'll also be sufficiently adapted to the new control scheme, which is, frankly, brilliant. Holding the right mouse button pulls the camera out to a third-person view, while your character hugs up against the nearest piece of scenery. From here, you can pop out and fire while still somewhat concealed...or you can blind-fire with limited accuracy.

Vegas itself serves as a suitable setting for *Rainbow Six*'s tactical nature, as Sin City's ritzy casinos steal the show (despite city officials' annoyance at the game's use of them). While you make linear progress through the story, the individual firefights utilize the decadent architecture in spectacular fashion. Terrorists burst in through glass ceilings and attack you from all sides, from all elevations. This is a truly three-dimensional experience that takes full advantage of the environment to build dramatic tension. While sneaking through the casino floor, the slightest movement can prompt you to open fire, and it's as likely to be the blinking of a slot machine that sets you off as it is a terrorist diving for cover.

> WHILE YOU PROGRESS THROUGH THE STORY, THE FIREFIGHTS USE THE DECADENT ARCHITECTURE IN SPECTACULAR FASHION.

HOUSE OF MULTIPLAYER BLUES

Franchise fans will no doubt spend the bulk of their time enjoying *Vegas* online. We had a few problems getting the game to connect, and the unpatched retail version suffers from a bug that causes the game to crash if you search for a multiplayer game using the default settings (unbelievable, when you think about it). As this issue of *GFW* goes to press, Ubisoft assures us that the problem is being addressed in a patch, which should already be available when you read this (the score here, however, does *not* assume this). Hopefully, the patch will also address some of the other small errors that the game randomly throws out there, too—like onscreen instructions never going away and some occasionally heinous clipping issues.

That said, the aforementioned co-op's certainly the online mode of choice, but *Vegas* also features plenty of team-based battles to engage in. It's not going to win any awards, but alongside the de rigueur, the game exhibits some flashes of brilliance. Of particular note: the new "attack and defend" mode, which—while simple in principal—rewards teamwork above all else. If you find yourself playing online with a group that works well together (often easier said than done), it's incredibly satisfying.

Long-term fans should (happily) note that Ubisoft Montreal is back on the *Rainbow Six* series. After producing the definitive experience with *Rainbow Six 3* (and missing last year's lackluster *Rainbow Six Lockdown* completely), the team's direction with *Vegas* is admirable. While it doesn't elevate *Rainbow Six* back to the genre-defining franchise it once was, it's still a solid, fun game...plus, thanks to Unreal Engine 3, it *looks* great. Here's hoping some of the more egregious bugs get ironed out soon.

John Davison

VERDICT

7.5\10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

- **Great single-player campaign and multiplayer variety; Unreal Engine 3 equals dazzling graphics.**
- **Bugs that should've been fixed before release.**

Instead of putting information in a dozen different places, *EU3* elegantly crams it into a single Swiss Army knife panel, which lets you gauge at a glance each province's relevant details.

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS III

Is that the Iberian Peninsula in your pocket?

PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive RELEASED Out now ESRB Rating: E PEGI Rating: 3 GENRE Strategy
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 1.0GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players VERSION REVIEWED Gold Master

REVIEW

You're probably squinting at that title and wondering "What the heck's a *Europa Universalis*?" After all, we're talking third in a series you're as likely to find people geeking over as collecting signed copies of Norman Davies' *Europe: A History* or Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

No surprise, then, that *Europa Universalis III* isn't so much a shot at wooing mainstreamers away from Firaxis' *Civilization* or Creative Assembly's *Total War* games as reinforcing what this grand strategy tour de force does so spectacularly well: simulating the bristling negotiations, knuckle-gnawing economic tradeoffs, and tit-for-tat nation-state skirmishes that characterized Renaissance- and Enlightenment-era Europe.

That's not entirely fair. *EU3* does attempt to broaden its appeal somewhat by incorporating a clean (if crude) 3D engine and helpfully streamlining its interface by packaging formerly shambolic commands into a single, intuitive info panel. Still, this is grand strategy for the indefatigable, compositing 250 start-anywhere countries (from majors like France to minors like Munster) formed from over 1,700 individually conquerable provinces, then barreling forward in speed-adjustable real time from literally any point you choose circa 1453 to 1792. If the notion of supervising vassals, fiddling budgets, managing naval fleets, and massing three-pronged land armies among dozens of other duties over the course of 300-plus years makes you dizzy...well, it should. That's the beauty of this series: It doesn't compromise, and if anything, *EU3* proves it doesn't have to.

BEST YET? YOU BETCHERALIS...

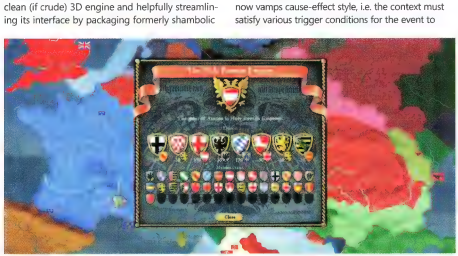
The first thing you sense playing *EU3* is just how well everything hooks together compared to its predecessors (chalk that up to lessons—both good and bad—gleaned from *Crusader Kings*, *Victoria*, and *Hearts of Iron II*). For starters, instead of historical events triggering monolithically, the event engine now vamps cause-effect style, i.e. the context must satisfy various trigger conditions for the event to occur. It's just a smarter way to run this sort of game, letting you organically shape history instead of being artificially corralled by it.

> GRAND STRATEGY FOR THE INDEFATIGABLE.

That sense of refinement suffuses everything, so that—for instance—nations no longer feel quite as arbitrary thanks to additions like alternate forms of government (monarchies, democracies) and "national ideas" (you can select up to 10 from 30 total) which yield unique reorienting improvements to variables like taxation and trade. A new espionage feature lets you deploy spies to incite insurrection or assassinate leaders, and diplomacy is at least twice as nuanced, including options to buy/sell individual provinces, engage in bilateral alliances, and subsidize other nations' wars.

Even the military's received an overhaul, so instead of purchasing reinforcements and marching them cross-country, armies now replenish automatically via the national manpower pool. This both rarefies your regiments and eliminates tedious, artificially punitive busywork. And while nothing trumps a human opponent, the improved A.I. plays a much shrewder game, acting more consistently in accordance with a nation's principles, but still capriciously enough to keep you jumping.

In anything this complex, someone's bound to tease out nitpicky balance issues eventually. But off the tarmac and for its breadth, *EU3* feels remarkably well-honed—arguably Paradox's finest achievement in the form to date. **Matt Peckham**



The revamped religious system adds the Holy See, a body of seven cardinals you can influence for boosts to stats like your national stability and prestige.

VERDICT

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

Necessary but judicious refinements; deep and rich historical flavor; shrewd A.I.

Tough learning curve; 3D visuals are a little rough around the edges.

iBuypower recommends Windows Vista™ Home Premium

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The ships look good; the space debris does not.

STAR TREK: LEGACY

Sensors indicate incoming atrocious pun

PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks DEVELOPER: Hard Zoo Software GENRE: Tactical Space Sim AVAILABILITY: Retail RATING: Everyone 10+
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.66GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail disc

REVIEW

Make no Bones about it: *Star Trek Legacy* is filled with treats for Trekkers...or wait, are we back to Trekkies now? How about just "nerds"? You get hyperaccurate renderings of several dozen series starships, big battles pitting the former Locutus against invincible world-assimilating Borg cubes, and a surprisingly smart narrative driven by the voices of all of *Star Trek*'s captainly thespians from Kirk to Bakula (though, oddly, you never see a human face—it's like it's Pixar's *Starships*).

But fan service can only take you so far, and *Legacy*'s maddening controls knock the solar wind out of the *Enterprise*'s sails. You can ostensibly pilot with WASD, but for most ships, this proves painful...and (in what I'm sure is a nod to authenticity) painfully slow. Autopilot's your best friend: Point your cursor at a target, tap F, and let the game sail you to your destination. When you switch to another ship in your four-craft fleet, watch 'em phaser-beam and torpedo-bombard enemies automatically. A.I.'s certainly not an issue, as any ship not currently under your direct control easily holds its own.

THE UNDISCOVERED KEYBOARD COMMAND

Legacy's ships look and sound just right, but the gameplay exercises authenticity to a fault. You're a slave to the Federation's senseless placement of phaser arrays—beams constantly flutter and lose their lock when the angle of your saucer section goes out of whack, and you'll want to shoot the engineer in charge of aligning these ships' photon-torpedo tubes. Worst of all: The infuriating "subsystem targeting" theoretically allows you to specifically knock out enemy engines, sensors, or weapons—but the in-game help says to activate it with "LS" (whatever that is) while the manual directs you to press "T"—without specifying that, by the way, it's actually a *capital* T. And that's only step one. When you do eventually figure out the mess 30 minutes later, cryptic icons appear, disappear, and change color with no rhyme or reason, leaving what *should* be a matter of pinpoint accuracy up to sheer dumb luck. An Xbox 360 controller makes things easier...but that's just sad.

Space combat's kinda fun once you resign yourself to letting autopilot handle most of the details.

Authenticity is *Legacy*'s biggest asset—and the game's story manages to find a surprisingly smart way to knit the eras together.

Most missions in the short single-player campaign involve shooting a whole bunch of Borg/Klingon/Romulan ships—which is fun through sheer force of nostalgia—with a goodly amount of escorting, rescuing, and beaming in away teams to space stations. One interesting noncombat mission finds Picard tractor-beaming stellar debris into larger pieces of stellar debris to prevent civilization-ending planetary collisions, but the space rocks look absolutely disgusting...as do most of the game's "special effects." Space stations explode into giant, embarrassing six-sided *Perfection* pieces, and not-too-distant satellites and other objects pop in and out of existence—inexcusable in *Legacy*'s sparsely populated vacuum of space.

Don't get too excited about *Legacy*'s multiplayer prospects, either. The game offers simplistic two-player co-op survival and four-player "deathmatch" modes (four ships per player from the Federation, Borg, Romulan, or Klingon fleets), but as of version 1.018 (the last as of press time), plenty of folks, myself included, must struggle with port-forwarding garbage, weird semi-lockups, and random "no connection" errors. For this? I'll take my chances with the away team. **Sean Molloy**

> FAN SERVICE CAN ONLY TAKE YOU SO FAR, AND *LEGACY*'S MADDENING CONTROLS KNOCK THE SOLAR WIND OUT OF THE *ENTERPRISE*'S SAILS.

VERDICT

+ Authentic voice acting and sound design; a few interesting noncombat missions.

– Exasperating controls; error-riddled manual; multiplayer connection problems.

5/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

FLYBOYS SQUADRON

It's the movie...without the fun, action, or drama

PUBLISHER: **Interactive Magic** DEVELOPER: **Electric Entertainment** GENRE: **Flight Sim** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space (flight stick recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

"Hey, guys, have you seen that cool new WWI air-war movie, *Flyboys*? Let's rename our old WWI online sim after it, toss in a few single-player missions that kind of tie into the film, and get it in the market while the movie is still out! Brilliant!"

Maybe that's not the discussion that resulted in *Flyboys Squadron*, but it's certainly the feeling one gets while playing this flight simulation. Interactive Magic's *Dawn of Aces II* is a massively multiplayer online WWI flight sim that launched back in 2003, and that's basically the game that you get in this package. The front of the box implies that the game immerses you in a world rich with the drama and camaraderie of war, but the delivered game features a weak set of 12 individual missions, three of which are training flights...and in the first of those, you don't even fly the plane—you simply watch.

A few of the later missions pack in some entertainment value on a first flythrough, while others are pure drudgery. In any case, the film-inspired missions are merely tacked onto the core *Dawn III* simulation as an underhanded way to lure retail shoppers that dug the movie. *Dawn III* itself isn't terribly popular these days, but it's still a decent MMO flight sim if you're interested in it; you'd be better served by just signing up for it online (you can download it at FlipFront.com) and taking a pass on this shameless decoy. ● **Jeff Lackey**

> THE FILM-INSPIRED MISSIONS ARE MERELY TACKED ONTO THE CORE *DAWN III* SIMULATION AS AN UNDERHANDED WAY TO LURE RETAIL SHOPPERS THAT DUG THE MOVIE.

● **"I can't die; I'm the hero!"**

VERDICT

- **WWI air-combat environment; ability to play in an established online community.**
- **A repackaged *Dawn of Aces III*; single-player campaign is anemic.**

3/10

BAD

Games for Windows

FORGE OF FREEDOM: THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 1861-1865

Rally 'round the history trivia

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **Western Civilization Software** GENRE: **Turn-Based Historical War Game** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box, E-tail (www.matrixgames.com)**
ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **500MHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 1GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Reviewing *Forge of Freedom* in 250 words is like writing a history of the American Civil War in one sentence: The North won. The substance of Western Civilization Software's latest design is likewise obscured by the fact that the playing experience is so heterogeneous that it defies a summary description. Built on the chassis of 2005's *Crown of Glory: Europe in the Age of Napoleon*, the games share some important weaknesses, like inadequate A.I. and a worse interface. But the system itself works much better for the Civil War than the Napoleonic Wars, so those who dismissed *Crown of Glory* should be prepared to give *Forge of Freedom* a chance.

The real question is, a chance to do what? The details with which the game is loaded suggest a design team with a real interest in and appreciation for the minutiae of history. But the sum of a lot of historical detail doesn't necessarily add up to a historical game, and the result here is a game that represents history in pieces without many of them fitting together. Combined with West Civ's penchant for requiring players to make obvious choices, it's only somewhat more successful as a game. You'll find yourself struggling through long, desultory periods of upgrading industries and monitoring state governors in between making some genuine strategic decisions and playing a few interesting (if oddly ahistorical) tactical battles. Wildly improbable historical events (like Canadian intervention) and goofy A.I. decisions add to the carnival feeling. It's a bouncy ride that can't be summarized with a numerical score. Which means it's a 6. ● **Bruce Geryk**

> IT'S A BOUNCY RIDE THAT CAN'T BE SUMMARIZED WITH A NUMERICAL SCORE.

● **The strategic map is divided into states and has a nice look to it. Just don't expect to click on any units reliably.**

VERDICT

- **Lots of historical flavor spices up a pretty decent strategy game.**
- **More of a collection of game mechanics than a coherent game design.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 2—SITUATION: COMEDY

So this dog and this rabbit walk into a TV station...

PUBLISHER: **Telltale Games/GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.gametap.com or sam.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 240MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Downloadable**

REVIEW

As the one episodic game thus far to actually maintain an episodic schedule (the two-month wait between chapters makes *Half-Life 2*'s annual timetable seem like pure torture by comparison), *Sam & Max* does its genre a big service. The game's tightly focused plot and puzzles work great in three-hour chunks and keep it free of the rampant illogic that most graphic adventures eventually succumb to...at least, when you consider the weird world that Sam and Max inhabit.

Situation: Comedy puts the anthropomorphic detective duo on the trail of a mad talk show host and her (literally) captive audience down at the local TV station. The puzzles here hinge on Sam and Max's participation in various daytime programs seemingly pulled straight out of *UHF* (some highlights: *Embarrassing Idol* and *Cooking Without Looking*), and most solutions don't place ridiculous demands on your deductive skills. Like the first episode, it's adventure gaming lite (and we mean that in a good way). It's also peppered with the characters' signature non-sequitur humor, which the game's writers demonstrate as both a blessing and a curse.

Plenty of the dialogue's chuckle-worthy ("Do you have any Pez dispensers with the head of infamous Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa?"), but it falls flat in equal amounts ("Bread logs make me logy."). The biggest pity, though: Reused (though still well-written) dialogue that occurs in Sam and Max's office and other locations recycled from the first episode. Sure, we need a few familiar haunts from chapter to chapter...but next time, throw us some new jokes to go with 'em, yeah? **Ryan Scott**

How appropriate—you fight like a cow.

This week, on *Myra!*: dogs and lagomorphs, living together...mass hysteria!

VERDICT

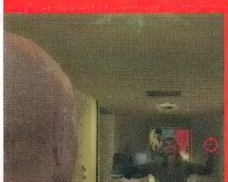
- **Logical puzzles; tight focus; some interesting new characters.**
- **Uneven humor; reused locations feel a little bit boring.**

7/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

THE SHIELD

Dark blue

PUBLISHER: **Aspyr** DEVELOPER: **Point of View** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256 MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**



Chrome-domed main character Vic Mackey gets himself into a lot of hairy situations.

REVIEW

A warning for those of you who aren't familiar with FX's cop drama *The Shield*: If you find the *Grand Theft Auto* series morally sketchy, don't even brush up against Aspyr's game-ification of your local CSI. As Detective Vic Mackey, you can break into a gangster's house, pocket drugs, cash, and weapons, and then cold-bloodedly murder a potential witness against you...and that's just the first mission. Of course, I'm not saying anything's wrong with a game about a bad guy; I just want to serve notice that this ain't one of those Dragnet-type cop dramas. No, ma'am.

What is wrong, however, is *The Shield*'s gameplay. Aspyr also released the game on the PlayStation 2, and a console-centric design philosophy is apparent throughout the PC port. Example: Far too much time's spent skulking around in the game's many "stealth" sequences. These work poorly with mouse-and-keyboard controls and they offer absolutely no margin for error—or any save games. So prepare to slog through the same massive room times than a Franciscan friar. Outside of the sneaking stuff, much of *The Shield*'s gameplay focuses on simplistic minigames that demand little in the way of skill or cleverness. Plus, the graphics are bland and bland, even for a PS2 title (come on, guys: we've seen *God of War II*—the PS2 can do better than this).

As is all too typical with licensed games, *The Shield*'s just another half-assed adaptation of superior source material. Let's just hope these guys aren't doing a *Rescue Me* game any time soon. **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **May resonate with series fans; unabashedly mature content.**
- **May annoy series fans; ugly graphics; gameplay consists mainly of minigames.**

4/10
BAD
Games for Windows

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

2006'S HIDDEN GEMS

Now that you've read up on all the best games of 2006—and some of what's coming in 2007—here's a peek at some good games you probably didn't give much thought to last year.

THE SHIP

This *Clue* meets *Sims* meets *Kitana* which first began its existence as a *Half-Life* mod, eventually winding up on Steam to mid-2006 as a stand-alone Source powered minigame. The concept's simple: 16 passengers on a cruise liner play predator and prey, each seeking a specific kill target while evading their own stalker. Grab a weapon, stay well-rested, slip into a disguise or two, and punch your mark's ticket before someone else punches yours. Snag this one on Steam—cheap!

BOOKWORM ADVENTURES

As usual, PopCap Games made a phenomenal showing in the casual games market over the past year. *Bonnie's Bookstore* garnered its share of attention early on due to some top-name development talent, and the more recent *Bookworm Adventures* gave us the eagerly awaited sequel to one of our favorite word games, with an RPG twist. With a finite beginning, middle, and end to the story, *BWA* is short and sweet—but still undeniably worth any puzzle fiend's precious time.

SPACE RANGERS 2: RISE OF THE DOMINATORS

Think of this often-overlooked action/strategy/RPG as the sci-fi equivalent of *Grand Theft Auto*: You can pursue the main plotline (the destruction of the titular Dominators) at your leisure, or wander off the beaten path and make your own fun as a freelance space ace or bloodthirsty pirate. Just make sure you get the game from Direct2Drive.com and spare yourself the pesky StarForce copy protection that comes bundled with the retail box (ick!).

1701 A.D.

If you missed this one, you're not alone—and who can blame you? *1701 A.D.* (third in a series that includes the likes of *1503 A.D.* and *1602 A.D.*) sounds like something straight out of the most boring history textbook of all time. It looks like a typical *Age of Empires* clone on the surface...but underneath, *1701*'s light on the real-time combat, instead presenting one of the best and most intricate economic sims in years.

DEFCON

It doesn't look like much—simple block letters, a purplish map of the world, and some crude monochrome icons of radar dishes and submarines—but developer introversion (U.K. indie darling thanks to *Darwinia*) proved it could do a lot with a little. The shorthand is *Global Thermonuclear War*—that fake game from the 1980s flick *WarGames*—but that doesn't capture how much fun it is to blow up large swaths of the Midwest.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

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Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade	8	1

Extend

Where your games live on forever!

• The Old World's on the right, with Tom's England in red and Bruce's Spain in yellow.

AH. THE NEW WORLD. SO FULL OF RICHES. YET SO TOTALLY IRRELEVANT IN TERMS OF WORLD DOMINATION.

• England steals diamonds from the Sioux.

INSIDE

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Falling Pieces
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A comprehensive look at *Eve Online* three years post-launch. Hint: It's good.

• Bruce's ill-fated Spanish spy gets busted.

TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

IMPERIALISM II: THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

Tom and Bruce duke it out old-school in a 1999 strategy classic

PUBLISHER: **SSI** DEVELOPER: **Frog City Software** GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Everyone**

THIS MEANS WAR!

BRUCE: *Imperialism II* is probably my favorite game of the 1990s. Since it's my favorite, it kind of goes without saying that it must be the best. It also explains why, seven years after it was published, I still know exactly where the game CD and the manual are.

TOM: Very few games merit keeping one of those gigantic days-of-yore computer-game boxes on your shelf. But *Imperialism II* is one such game. Until *Civilization IV* came out, it was my favorite turn-based strategy game.

BRUCE: Tom and I will reprise our European alter egos, which we first established in *Civ 3* and then *Civ 4*, as England and Spain. I hope Tom doesn't start calling me El Bruce again, though.

TOM, 1512: The *Carrack Chicklette* discovers the New World. Since I found it first—the New World, that is—I call dibs.

BRUCE, 1512: Ah, the New World. So full of riches, yet so totally irrelevant in terms of world domination. The victory condition: control of over half of the Old World provinces. So while an empire from sea to shining sea may be just dandy, it only matters insofar as it provides materials for the world's Most Important Place: Europe.

TOM, 1528: My explorers find gems in the Cherokee capital province. I could invade, but that's not very English. Besides, it's important to take your time and look around once you discover the New World. If you just rush ashore on the first patch of land you find, you might end up with someplace like Massachusetts.

So I open a trade consulate and then an embassy with the Cherokee. Next, I'll send a Merchant to start buying their resources so I can develop them, buy them, and keep a cut of the proceeds. Me and the Cherokee are going to be business partners.

BRUCE, 1530: Tom has gems, while I have jack. I've scoured so many mountains and deserts, my explorers have sand in their underwear and snow down their pants. Why mountains and deserts? Because that's where *Imperialism II* hides the goodies. Without a source of New World riches, it's going to be mighty hard to support the great Empire of Spain's armies. Unless I can turn them into magical armies by discovering magic. Barring that, I need to start selling goods that I could probably put to use myself.

TOM, 1542: Now that I'm good buddies with the Cherokee (who also have silver, sugar, and tobacco!), I've got a bit of a dilemma. Like all the other Great Powers, I have a small army back in the Old World. As standing armies are wont to do, they're just kind of hanging out, twiddling their thumbs, sharpening their halberds, cleaning their crossbows, that sort of thing. They need someplace to invade. Having found diamonds in a small patch of Sioux Desert called Gazit, I figure that's as good a place as any for the English army to start the time-honored practice of slaughtering indigenous folk and taking their land.

BRUCE, 1542: I wish *I* had a diamond mine. Instead, I've got a lot of copper. Copper isn't much use without tin, which your workers know the secret of mixing up to make bronze. Since bronze is good for making armies and ships, and I can't support a lot of armies and ships due to food issues, that makes copper not such a great thing to have. Anyone want to buy some hardly used copper ore real cheap?

TOM, 1544: After killing a few Sioux bowmen and running off the rest, Gazit becomes the property of His Majesty the King of England—i.e., me. Or, in true role-playing fashion, us.

BRUCE, 1550: Tom's need to turn everything into a role-playing game is truly scary. Every now and then, he sends me messages in the chat system that say things like, "How is the weather in your parts, bonnie old chap?" even though he could just talk in a normal voice into the voice comm we have going. I'd ask him if he's dressed up as a foppy English bloke, but that would require me to ask what he's wearing. I'm not going there.

TOM, 1560: Pip-pip, I've finished exploring the New World's coastlines, so I bring the *Chicklette* home and add her to the English fleet with my new galleons. »

Tom's wars against the Dutch cost him dearly.

TOM, 1565: It's important to refer to the score charts every so often to make sure Bruce isn't winning, and also to figure out who to be buddies with. As of the mid-16th century, the major military powers so far are France and Portugal. I'd like to have a major military power as a buddy. A royal wedding with France would improve our relationship, so I've been hitting her up for an alliance. But she keeps turning me down. Maybe I should be asking Portugal to dance instead.

TOM, 1566: Awesome news! Bruce just allied with Sweden. Now that he's got an alliance with Holland and Sweden, he's locked into a diplomatic relationship with the two weakest powers in the game. Hah!

BRUCE, 1566: "Locked in" is a pretty drastic way of putting it. Let's just say that the dominos are set up, but I can yank mine out of the way at any time. For now, I'm just going to use my alliance as a way of warning off any potential adversaries. The Dutch and Swedes may not be so tough individually, but when they team up, they can really give you a wooden-shoe kicking. And, uh...pelt you with meatballs.

TOM, 1572: I've got a steady cash flow from importing Cherokee gold, silver, and gems and Gazit diamonds. The people of England are kitted out in lots of sweet jewelry. In fact, we're importing so many jewels and precious metals that we can't spare cargo space to haul back the spices we've found. Which is why English food is so bland! Haw-haw! Stick around for jokes about Swiss pocket knives, France surrendering, and Swedish meatballs. Oh, wait, you've already had one of those.

TOM, 1580: France and Portugal are running amok conquering stuff in the New World. Figuring that I should keep up, I march out of Gazit to take a nearby Sioux territory. At least, that was the idea. I lose two-thirds of my army and I'm driven back. What would Churchill do? It's time to stop obsessing over jewelry and start building up an army. This is a 10-year-plan sort of thing. It helps to make notes on a legal pad. Or, if you're roleplaying, on a sheet of vellum with a feather quill.

BRUCE, 1584: The most important thing an army can do in this game is conquer Old World provinces. You can confirm the reason for that by referring back to the start of this story. The problem is, if you start conquering too many provinces, the A.I. nations start to get nervous that you're going to win. So it's never a good idea to get ahead first. You sort of need to lurk in the background for a while until someone jumps out in front and use an alliance to take him down.

So, am I doing that? Not a chance. I'm still suffering for my lack of looting and pillaging of Aztec treasures, which I never found. Cortés and Pizarro would be so disappointed.

TOM, 1590: England didn't start with a lot of wool. So to make cloth, I'm buying cotton from the Cherokee plantations I've developed. Every time I buy their cotton, I get a cut of the money and improve my relationship with the Cherokee. And as my relationship improves, I get to keep a bigger cut of the money, which also applies to their gems, gold, and silver. It's really fun to kill the Sioux and take their land, but I really appreciate that *Imperialism II* also lets me indulge my more benevolent imperialistic tendencies.

BRUCE, 1592: Spain is a land of wool from Catalonia to the Pyrenees. But while Tom is shopping for fabrics, he isn't buying them from me. In the multiplayer game, you can tell when other players are buying by the fact that an information screen sits a bit too long. With only two players, this means the person buying is Tom. Hey, Tom, are you too good for some quality Spanish headscarves and ascots?

TOM, 1594: France finally signs an alliance with me. Say hello to my big friend!

TOM, 1605: In *Imperialism II*, you need a supply of sugar, then tobacco, and then furs to upgrade your labor pool with more skilled workers. So Gazit has started producing sugar. Along with the Cherokee sugar plantations, I'm ready to start upgrading my workforce by feeding them candy. Cigars and furry hats don't really come into play until the 17th century.

BRUCE, 1620: I just lost my spy. While he (or she) was in London, it was easier for me to acquire technology that Tom already had. Of course, this means I'm always playing catch-up to Tom. But since this research is free, and the game didn't see fit to give me all the riches Tom somehow "found," I'm reduced to lurking in dark corners near Whitehall, trying to learn the secrets of "large merchantmen." I don't like the way that sounds.

TOM, 1640: While Bruce is asking around about where sailors hang out, I've grown my military to the point that I'm awarded my first general. I name him Harry Potter, which sounds suitably English.

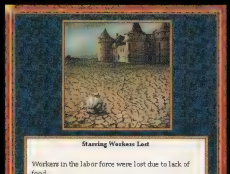
BRUCE, 1640: I wish *I* had a general.

TOM, 1644: While pushing inland, I discover gems at a remote inland mountain range in Seneca. I can link these up to my port in Gazit, passing a road through three Sioux silver mines. I will call this "The Money Road."

TOM, 1664: Finally, a war! It's just a minor one, however. France declares war on the Minor Nation of Germany. No one likes Germany enough to defend her, at least not from a heavy-hitting Great Power like France. So we all stand idly by while France proceeds to swallow pieces of Germany.

• Tom's English establish diplomatic and commercial ties with the Cherokee.

• Gazit offers Tom sugar to go with his diamonds.



BRUCE, 1664: It's too bad this isn't going to happen in 1939. Germany is right next to me, yet I'm powerless to defend her from the mighty... French. Yes, the French. I know, I know.

TOM, 1676: To grow my hungry labor force, I have to extend my infrastructure to grain in Wales and beef in Northumberland. Still no spices, so I hope my people don't expect anything fancy. But the candy's rolling in and cigars are on the way. Get ready to light up, old chaps!

TOM, 1692: This is the year that everything changes. It all starts with some sort of dispute between Holland and Italy. The Dutch are normally so tolerant, but for whatever reason, someone snapped and declared war. Now, it just so happens that I've developed a very close relationship with Italy. So Italy comes to me and asks me to intervene. I accept, which means Italy becomes part of the English empire and instantly puts me at war with Holland.

Here's where it gets tricky. This means I'm also at war with Bruce, who was allied with Holland. But more importantly, it means my ally France is at war with Bruce and Holland. This is the same France who's consistently been in first place in terms of military and naval power. Imagine that! And Bruce is about to find this out firsthand.

The bad news is that suddenly I have an enormous army of crappy Italian bowmen to feed. My food supply was working on a razor-thin margin to supply my growing labor force and now the balance is shot to hell by a bunch of hungry Italians with outdated weaponry. So I ship them all off to the New World, hoping they'll get killed in the battles I'm about to fight with Holland.

BRUCE, 1694: If I made one mistake in this game, it's this one right now: I honor my alliance with Holland. This makes France declare war on me. That's very bad. And here's where the *poulets* come home to roost. I thought that maybe somehow my entry into the war would convince the French not to honor their alliance with England. Instead, I'm at war with France and Tom. The most immediate consequence: France has blockaded my ports, and I can't sell any goods to maintain my economy. As the Bank of Spain sinks deeper into negative-peso territory, I can't even try and take back the provinces I'm losing to France, because attacking costs money. So my armies are effectively on permanent defense.

TOM, 1694: No luck with casualties yet. Due to a shortage of grain and meat, I lose nearly a third of my labor force to starvation. However, I still have plenty of sugar for my skilled workers. Where's Marie Antoinette with a pithy "let them eat cake" remark when you need her?

TOM, 1698: Most of the fighting is taking place between the New World territories of Gazit (my port) and Crazy Horse (the Dutch port). I spend vast sums of money launching assaults, but the Dutch fort and its artillery keeps driving me back.

BRUCE, 1700: This is pretty much it for me. My New World holdings are being quickly swallowed up by the French war machine. My Old World garrisons are just that, without the ability to attack. And my namby-pamby "advisors" keep sending me messages like, "Look to the seas!" when it's pretty obvious that, yes, a big French fleet's sailing this way. Why didn't you give me some "advice" before I got into this mess?

TOM, 1702: At one point, trying to attack the more vulnerable Dutch territories, I actually lose Gazit. Since Gazit was my port province, I lose not only its diamonds, but access to all the gems from Seneca and the silver along the way. The Money Road is shut down! And since I was operating at a deficit because of my repeated failed assaults, this puts me into an economic death spiral.

TOM, 1716: After a steady buildup thanks to my Cherokee holdings, I'm about to start launching renewed assaults against the Dutch provinces in the New World. These provinces include my inland territory, which was conquered when Holland split up her forces and went on the offensive. However, France took my former provinces from the Dutch, which means I can't get them back without declaring war on France! Those were my gem mines in Seneca, and that was my silver, and now it's all being carried back to Paris.

I finally make peace with Holland, having beaten her into submission, but I've lost most of my New World holdings. Bruce has been completely conquered, but I'm dragged back into third place behind France and Portugal, where I remain for the next hundred years until the game ends. I may not have won *Imperialism II*, but not losing as badly as Bruce is good enough for me.●

FINAL SCORE
FRANCE WINS!

Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the video-game industry's most prolific freelance critics, Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

GFW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years. He loves war games like most people love oxygen.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

After 10 years without a single one, we're going to have two strategic-level American Civil War games within the space of a few months. The first, *Forge of Freedom* by Matrix Games and Western Civilization Software, is out now. You can read my review on pg. 81.

The other is *American Civil War: Our Hearts Were Touched with Fire* by French developer AGEOD, which is responsible for my personal 2006 wargame of the year, *Birth of America*. One big difference from the former, though, is the absence of a tactical combat engine.

As lead AGEOD developer Philippe Malacher puts it: "Our emphasis is on strategy, not on tactics. We prefer to develop a very competent strategic A.I., and not two poor ones. We don't want to see a game where the player can win by exploiting the tactical engine and winning against impossible odds, just because the A.I. is too dumb and is manipulated. As you say, this is also a game-design decision. Players manipulate units at a high level, even if said units are very detailed.... They should not have to handle a world simulation at the battalion level, spending a good two-thirds of their time in a tactical engine."

● **AGEOD's American Civil War game looks very similar to *Birth of America*...**

● **...While *Forge of Freedom* goes for a period look.**

This makes perfect sense. But a poster on the AGEOD forums made the obvious counterargument: "Gamers like to control. After we maneuver our forces at the strategic level, with careful planning and coordination of our forces to force a battle, we then hand over control to the game to fight the tactical battle. It's a control and ownership issue. When we win, we want the glory, and when we lose, we do not want the excuse that it's the A.I.'s fault."

Is this the right attitude? How much does the presence of a tactical combat engine influence your enjoyment of a game? Let me know at GFWletters@ziffdavis.com. ● **Bruce Geryk**

Bruce Geryk

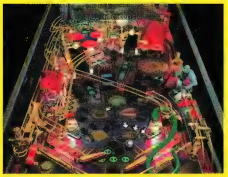
Bruce is a walking encyclopedia of war-gaming knowledge. Need proof? Visit his blog at http://grognards.1UP.com.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

This month, when visiting the EB Games website (www.ebgames.com), I was elated to discover the release of *Ultimate Pro Pinball*. It collects not just some of the best pinball games ever, but some of the best *PC games* ever—full-bore simulations with outstanding ball physics that allow you to fiddle with machine conditions, including how well-maintained each table is. *Ultimate Pro Pinball* includes three games: the prehistoric *Timeshock!*, the taxicab-themed *Big Race USA*, and the Jules Verne–inspired *Fantastic Journey*. Of the three, *Big Race USA* is the crown jewel, a tricky and insanely addictive board with tons of special challenges and fantastic multiball action. *Fantastic Journey* comes in as a close second in terms of quality, and *Timeshock!*'s pretty good...but not close to the other two. I cannot recommend these games highly enough—if you like pinball at all, you owe it to yourself to buy this package.



● ***Fantastic Journey* is an outstanding pinball sim...and a little more forgiving than the other games in the package.**

● ***Hollywood Mogul 3*: a good game hampered by a lousy, busy interface.**

SCIENCE FICTION DOUBLE FEATURE

My other recent addiction: *Hollywood Mogul 3*. This lo-fi spreadsheet game comes as close to a hardcore casual game as you'll find; the subject matter—running your own virtual movie studio—is immediately accessible, but the presentation and depth of play aren't. *HM3* doesn't have the worst interface ever, but it sure takes a shot at winning that title. If you can get over the muddled presentation, you'll find a game that's everything you probably wished *The Movies* was: a real simulation of movie producing. The game's significantly deeper this time around, though some shortcuts (most notably the diminished role of screenwriters) exist. While copyright concerns dictate the game be stocked with fictional stars, an incredibly devoted fan base has already created custom files with hundreds of real-life talent—so if you want to make an erotic romp called *Back Hair Casanovas* starring Danny DeVito, Robin Williams, and Jessica Alba, you can (I made a cool $220 million on that baby). You can download the game and the talent files at www.hollywood-mogul.com. ● **Robert Coffey**

Robert Coffey

Robert's silver-screen erotic romps are all the rage in *Hollywood Mogul 3*.

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T
TEEN
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: Eve Online

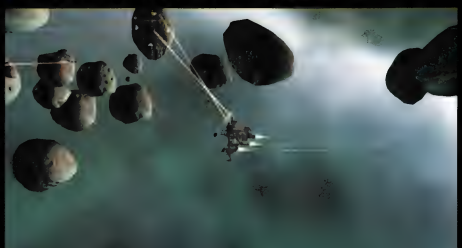
COLUMN

Previously, in GFW #1: *Ever the virtual mogul, my good buddy Hwang finally talked me into jetting across the wide-open galaxy of* Eve Online *with him. After figuring out how to create an effective character (thanks to Hwang's expert advice) and sitting through a snore-inducing tutorial, I undocked my puny ship and set out to explore the universe...*

...and after about a month of futzing around with some of the most boring and repetitive NPC-given quests I'd ever seen in an MMO, I was ready to eject myself into the vacuum of space and call it quits. Sure, Hwang gave me about 3,000,000 interstellar credits (or "ISK," for you lingo-savvy types out there) back when I started, but further profits trickled in at an excruciatingly slow pace.

"You're doing it all wrong," Hwang told me matter-of-factly. "Those NPC agent missions are real slow going, especially when you're not flying a big battleship. But hey, it's not the only way to make money—how 'bout you come out to the Maurasi system and mine with me? We'll split the profits right down the middle!"

Welcome to Jita—the *Eve Online* equivalent of morning rush hour.



Mining's about as much fun as it looks. Thank goodness I didn't have to put up with this for very long.

SEE LASER MINE. MINE, LASER, MINE!

If I knew one thing about *Eve*, it's that mining equaled *boredom*. Mining works like this: You build up your mining skill, fit a mining laser on your ship, fly out to an asteroid belt that hasn't been strip-mined by botters, and shoot asteroids with the aforementioned laser until your cargo hold fills up with ore. Then you haul it to a station, sell the load, head back to the asteroid field, and repeat the process until your head explodes. I *really* didn't want to resort to that...but hey, maybe I'd make enough ISK to get started on something else. I'd do it for a night or two; what could it hurt?

Hwang was relieved to hear that he'd found a mining partner. "That's the spirit, man!" he exclaimed. "Look, you won't even have to do much—you can just chill here and mine. You jettison the ore when your cargo hold gets full, then I'll haul it all back in my industrial ship. I'm all decked out with cargo expanders, so it'll be a breeze." We did just that...*for an entire week*. I mined, Hwang hauled, and I did plenty of research while my little laser extracted that precious ore. At the end of the week, my bank account held something to the tune of 12,000,000 ISK. But more importantly, my research opened my mind to an entirely different—and potentially much more lucrative—financial endeavor: day trading.

> IF I KNEW ONE THING ABOUT *EVE*, IT'S THAT MINING EQUALED *BOREDOM*.

SPACE TYCOON

Buy low, sell high. The principle isn't much different from our real-world stock market. Sure, flying from system to system often took a long time—roughly an hour for a 20-jump route—but the regular payoffs would make it all worthwhile. I spent some time training up the appropriate skills, bought myself a Badger MkII industrial ship (the same model Hwang usually zipped around in), and went to work.

"You might want to use the Jita system as your home base," Hwang advised. "It's pretty much *Eve*'s Grand Central Station. Everybody goes there to dump their goods, and it's one or two jumps away from a lot of other popular regions, so you can check the market numbers in a bunch of different places real fast, as long as you can hang with the lag." His tone got suddenly serious as he offered another nugget of wisdom. "Watch out for low-security space. PKs love to hang out there, and your Badger's got nothing on those guys." I made a mental note of this warning as my warp drive kicked in, taking me one step closer to untold riches.

To be continued... **Ryan Scott**

Ryan Scott

GFW reviews editor Ryan Scott has some high-quality R.A.M. he'd love to sell you for a very competitive price.

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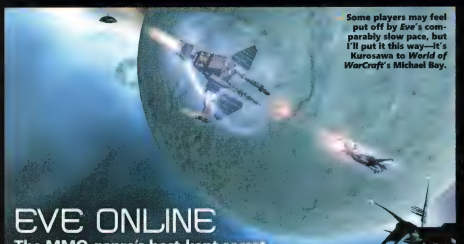
UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches



Some players may feel put off by *Eve*'s comparably slow pace, but I'll put it this way—it's Kurosawa to *World of WarCraft*'s Michael Bay.

EVE ONLINE

The MMO genre's best-kept secret

PUBLISHER: **CCP** DEVELOPER: **CCP** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.eve-online.com)**
ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space**
MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **2.14.28296**

PATCH REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE
Games for Windows

Think of three-year-old space sim/MMO *Eve Online* as online gaming's miracle baby: Since its debut in 2003, *Eve*'s amassed a stable user base of around 125,000 subscribers (according to the number-crunchers at mmogchart.com), deployed two free expansion-sized content updates, and garnered a reputation as one of the most dynamic, content-rich, and open-ended MMOs since *Ultima Online*. In a landscape dominated by *World of WarCraft* and other direct *EverQuest* descendants, *Eve* breaks all the rules—and flourishes for it.

What started off as a cool concept with too many loose ends (a spotty tutorial, very little in-game direction, overcomplicated/underdocumented mechanics, and a brutal PVP climate) eventually evolved into an enjoyable alternative to the typical sword-and-sorcery grind, much to the delight of *Eve*'s unfiinchingly loyal fans. And as of the recent *Revelations* expansion (or, at least, phase one of three for said expansion), *Eve* finally greets new players with an experience that's unlikely to leave them totally lost.

CHARACTER WIZARD

Previously, character generation—a key process in any MMO—essentially amounted to a series of blind choices that you'd inevitably learn were the wrong ones (time to roll up another toon!). The overhauled character-maker holds your hand and explains *why* that Caldari Frigate IV skill matters more than some rinky-dink Leadership I skill. It also gives new characters enough proficiency to matter; in other words, getting to the fun stuff doesn't take quite as long as before.

And *Eve* defines "the fun stuff" more subjectively than any other MMO on the market: You can fly NPC missions, fight space pirates, work the in-game market, manufacture items, harvest asteroid ore, take on trade contracts for other players, or just bully them. "But that sounds like lots of other MMOs!" Yeah—except none of the aforementioned activities actually relate to your character's progress, outside of bringing in cash. Instead, *Eve* takes the unique approach of training skills in real time, whether you're cruising through space or logged out altogether. Need to train that Science skill from level I to II? Give it an hour. What about bumping Electronics up from III to IV? Just over a day—better leave it training overnight. Point is: *Eve* caters to all kinds; it doesn't force you to run a combat-focused hamster wheel in exchange for forward progress, and you're better off for it. Time's the great equalizer here...and in case you're wondering, not even the longest-term players know every skill in the book.

THE OUTER RIM

The lifers *do*, however, have a stranglehold on the far reaches of *Eve*'s expansive universe. The entire game's spent in your spaceship (no planetary stopovers), zooming around a daunting single-server galaxy map. Taking a note from *Star Wars*, *Eve*'s central star systems stay safe and secure...but in unrestricted space, you'd best watch your back. Player alliances control (and contest) the outer fringes of the map, which is where *Eve*'s grand success as a social game really comes into focus.

Usually, unrestricted freedom equals outright anarchy...but in *Eve*, that ain't so. Sure, you *might* get shot down by some unruly miscreant the minute you step into zero-security space, but—generally speaking—player corporations (*Eve*'s word for "guilds") capably police themselves and welcome newbies with intelligence, maturity, and helping hands—unfortunate rarities in most MMOs. If you want risk-filled PVP, it's definitely here...but if not, player-controlled space offers safety in numbers.

Frankly, this paltry synopsis barely scratches *Eve*'s surface...but with any luck, perhaps it'll clue in at least a few bored MMO mavens on the game's quiet brilliance (and vastly increased accessibility, post-*Revelations*). Like it says up top, *Eve*'s the genre's best-kept secret—for three years and counting. Maybe it's time the secret got out. ● **Ryan Scott**

● **The player-driven economy's second to none. Clever players can take advantage of the market and put themselves on the fast track to riches.**

● **Crafting-happy gamers get plenty of ore to mine and plenty of hardware to manufacture.**

● **And yes, go-kill-X-number-of-bad-guys NPC missions exist for those who want 'em.**

VERDICT

- **An unconventional MMO with limitless potential.**
- **Players weaned on more traditional MMOs might take issue with the "make your own fun" mindset.**

9/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows

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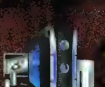

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Missed out on the first installment of Telltale's episodic graphic adventure? Check out the demo of the newly released "director's cut."

EVERQUEST II: PLAY THE FAE (DEMO)

Float like a butterfly, sting like a wizard with some sort of bee-swarm spell. Try out *EQ2*'s recently introduced race, the Fae, in this seven-day free trial.

AGATHA CHRISTIE: MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS (DEMO)

Fakes on a train. Cut through the lies and find out whodunit in this graphic-adventure version of the famed detective tale.

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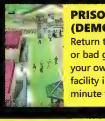
The king has died without producing an heir. The Star Kingdom has fallen apart, with most of the worlds declaring their independence. Now's your chance to shine.

ARMADO (DEMO)

Greatest story never told? Once upon a time, an armadillo had to save the last queen of the great eagles using a satchel of magical eggs given to him by a fox prophet.



PRISON TYCOON 2 (DEMO)

Return to Oz. Play good warden or bad guard and take charge of your own private incarceration facility in this time-limited 60-minute trial.

HEROES OF ANNIHILATED EMPIRES V1.1 (PATCH)

Having issues with this fantasy-RPG/RTS hybrid? This patch fixes critical errors, adds two brand new skirmish maps, and tweaks game balance.

1701 A.D. V1.01 (PATCH)

Tweaks of the trade: This patch tunes up Aspyr's excellent commodities- and market-management game.

THE SIMS 2: PETS BODY SHOP (PATCH)

Don't let pet incompatibility drag you down! This patch makes the *Pets* version of Body Shop get along with previous expansions.

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS! V1.1 (PATCH)

This patch adds lots of great new features! Like a free camera! A "use all trains" command in the train-table mode! A terrain editor! And! More!

NEXUIZ V2.2.2 (FREEWARE)

This free 3D deathmatch first-person shooter sticks with the basics, keeping things fast and fun.

RIP 3: THE LAST HERO (DEMO)

The boundaries between the worlds of living and the dead are blurring, so you better keep your aim sharp in this top-down 2D shooter.

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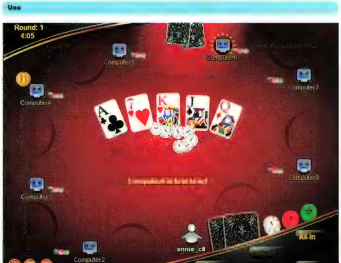
Casual Corner for Casual Fun

The life of a casual gamer

Starting in the April issue of *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, this space in The Official Word will be taken up by a Casual Corner feature that will focus on casual gamers and the games they play. In the last year, casual gaming has become one of the hottest arenas for game developers and game players alike as more than 94 million people around the world connect through Xbox Live® Arcade or on Internet sites such as **MSN Games**® (http://games.msn.com) to access the hundreds of games available. This ease of access to a variety of fun and challenging games has created an assortment of new gamer types, from the Fun-Seeking Solo Gamer to the heavy-duty Reward-Seeking Online Gamer—I fall into the latter category.

I decided to get a jump start on next month's Casual Corner by looking at the way casual games play a part in my life.

First of all, at work (where I spend one-third of my life), I work hard and get a lot done. And one of the reasons I'm so productive is that I know when to take a short break to release some stress and refresh my mind by playing the free online Web versions of casual games at MSN Games. This is where casual games shine! Games like ***Hexic***, with its cluster-creating, rich patterning play, and ***Bejeweled 2***, which has become one of the most popular games on the Internet with its drop-in, drop-out jewel-matching mode-variability gameplay, are perfect for those short breaks.



When I get home, I'll often drop into a fast-action, chain-popping game like ***LUXOR 2***, which has become one of the hottest-selling sequels in the history of casual games! In this case, I downloaded a free trial version, played for an hour—and didn't want to stop! *LUXOR 2* features 88 gorgeously rendered levels featuring stunning graphics that bring the ancient pyramids to life. It's always a challenge to get farther and score more points—the gameplay is addictive and full of surprises.

The weekends bring the opportunity to mix up my game playing a little, and I'll spend more time with my console—or not. I find that nothing gets me in shape for my Saturday night poker game than warming up with ***Texas Hold 'Em*** at **MSN Games**. The tournament-style play is fast-paced and uses virtual chips—since the money isn't real, there's no chance that I'll lose my cash before I play the real deal with my buddies that evening.

With more than 500 games available on **MSN Games**, there's really no problem at all filling the time that's left on Sunday. I kick my feet up, crank up Xbox Live Arcade, and spend a little more time with my favorite games, like *Bejeweled 2*, or ***Uno***®, or ***Feeding Frenzy***, or…well you get the idea.

There are a lot of great games out there to play—so let's get started! And have fun playing!

–The Casual Gamer

Microsoft Casual Games offers more than 400 games via MSN® Games, Windows Live Messenger, Windows® OS Games, and Xbox Live® Arcade, providing the ultimate playing experience for millions of casual gamers from around the world to compete, collaborate, and socialize—anytime, anywhere.

PC Puzzle Mania

The rise of puzzle games

Why are puzzle games so popular? Is it because they pose a problem or an enigma? Or is it because they provide logistical problems as a form of entertainment that spans languages and cultures and is universal to all? When we play puzzle games, are we simply responding to a basic human urge to create order out of chaos?

Whatever the reason, there's a whole world of puzzle games out there and they're more popular than ever!

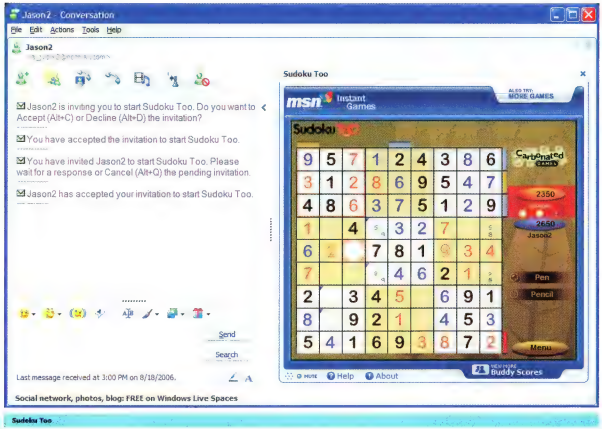
Top Puzzle Games

Sudoku is a worldwide puzzling sensation that requires players to use logic to determine where specific numerals belong on a square grid. While its origins date back to the 19th century, Sudoku's popularity has exploded to unprecedented levels over the past few years. Featured in many newspapers and countless puzzle books, the number-crunching logic game that requires no math skill has become a worldwide phenomenon. And now MSN Games® is taking it to the next level with five Sudoku variations—including ***Sudoku Too*** for Windows Live™ Messenger.

Think you're an expert at completing Sudoku puzzles? Think again... and then prepare for some new challenges!

With hundreds of PC puzzle games available in a variety of modes—from free online games to PC download games to subscription games and games for Windows Live Messenger—there has never been a better time to be an active puzzler. Let's take a look at some of the hottest puzzle games on MSN Games (http://games.msn.com).

Bejeweled holds an honored place in the hall of puzzle games as one of the crown jewels in the casual games industry. Originally developed by PopCap Games, this classic Match 3 puzzler took the world by storm when it was first introduced and has spawned sequels such as ***Bejeweled 2*** and special holiday editions. Simply put, the goal is to make lines of three or more matching gems—the more matches you make, the higher your score. The gameplay is simple and addictive.


Jason2 - Conversation
File Edit Actions Tools Help
Jason2
Jason2 is inviting you to start Sudoku Too. Do you want to Accept (Alt+C) or Decline (Alt+D) the invitation?
You have accepted the invitation to start Sudoku Too.
You have invited Jason2 to start Sudoku Too. Please wait for a response or Cancel (Alt+Q) the pending invitation.
Jason2 has accepted your invitation to start Sudoku Too.
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Social network, photos, blog: FREE on Windows Live Spaces
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About
Buddy Scores
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2350
2650
Jason2

What *Bejeweled* brought to Match 3 play, ***Zuma*** brought to the chain-popping arena. By utilizing a colorful Aztec theme, PopCap Games struck a nerve with casual gamers who particularly enjoy controlling a ball-spitting frog. As with the best puzzlers, players can quickly grasp the concept of the game, the controls are intuitive and easy to use, and the game progresses from easily playable to incredibly challenging with that "just five more minutes/one more level" feeling.

Rounding out our top puzzle games, ***Chuzzle*** is the new, uh, kid on the block. Actually, Chuzzles are googly-eyed balls of fur that giggle and squeak as you follow Match 3 rules in this hit by PopCap Games. The weirdness of the Chuzzle critters is matched by the weirdness of your mission; by matching the Chuzzles, you are also collecting their eyeballs in a beaker—when the beaker is full, you proceed to the next level. This game seems to have struck the right balance between cuteness and weirdness because it continually rates as one of the most popular puzzlers on MSN Games.

Bejeweled 2

Developing Stories and Action

Increasingly, game developers are taking the straightforward mechanics of the great puzzlers and pumping them full of incredible graphics and action. The results are dynamic games that get you caught up in seeing where you'll land in the next stage and what will be waiting for you.

One such game, Hot Lava's ***7 Wonders of the Ancient World***, takes the basic Match 3 concept and, almost literally, builds on it. Starting at the Great Pyramid of Giza, the goal is to make matches to clear the board—and lower the stones that will be used to build the great structure onto the backs of the workers while staying within the designated time limit. The gameplay is fast as you're forced to meet three separate goals: the time limit, lowering the blocks, and clearing the board. And when you've finished the Great Pyramid, you're off to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon as you work your way through all seven of the ancient wonders.

Chuzzle

Jewel Quest, developed by iWin, takes you on an archaeological quest into a deep, mysterious jungle to find and explore ancient relics and ruins while searching for lost Mayan gold. The story is told through a series of "Previous Quest Notes" that take you further into the heart of the Mayan world.

As this trend unfolds, puzzle games will naturally evolve to take advantage of the new technologies and game-depth potential—in the same way that instant messaging has changed the game-playing field.

The Messenger Connection

Playing your favorite puzzler is no longer a solitary activity as some of the hottest games are being redesigned for dual play via instant messaging services such as Windows Live Messenger. These exciting variations allow you to contact your friends and invite them to play along with you in real time—no matter where they're located. In fact, each month more than 16 million people in more than 30 countries utilize the rich, interactive Windows Live Messenger platform to play one of two dozen dual-player games.

Along with the popular games like *Bejeweled* and *Jewel Quest* that have recently launched as dual-player versions on Windows Live Messenger, MSN Games has gone the extra distance and created ***Sudoku Too***, the first dual-player Sudoku game that offers both competitive and cooperative modes allowing players to play against each other as well as *with* each other—whether they're side-by-side or miles apart.

Sudoku Too is perfect for beginners and experts alike. It offers three difficulty levels—Easy, Normal, and Hard—and you can also choose to make your answers permanent in "Pen" mode or, if you're less confident, use "Pencil" mode to fill in a temporary solution.

To play, simply open a Messenger window and locate the games icon in the Messenger menu on the left side of the window. Click on the icon to pull up the complete list of available fun, interactive game titles to play with a friend. Once you have selected your game, pick one of your friends from your list of Messenger contacts and click on their name to send an invitation to play the game with you. All Messenger games are turn-based, competitive, or cooperative two-player titles and your game will remain live as long as both players leave the Messenger window open.

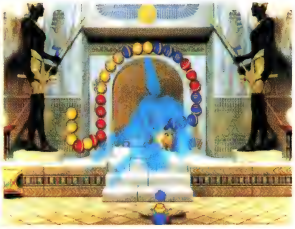
Windows Live Messenger offers 20 free titles, and four premium titles that are available through the MSN Instant Games Clubhouse subscription service.

Learn more here: http://messenger.msn.com/Resource/games.aspx.

The Lure of LUXOR

Egypt has never been hotter!

Embark on a beautiful voyage across 88 all-new levels.



Wield the mystical winged scarab to shoot and destroy the approaching spheres.

In ***LUXOR 2***, players embark on a beautiful voyage across 88 all-new levels of brilliantly displayed crisp and stunning graphics set amongst the pyramids and temples of ancient Egypt. Wield the mystical winged scarab to shoot and destroy the approaching magical spheres before they reach the pyramids at the end of their path. And to help shoot down those enemy spheres, *LUXOR 2* features more explosive power-ups than ever before!

A new ranking system lets you work your way from Farm Hand to Pharaoh with new bonus rounds for added fun and excitement at the end of every stage. Add 15 thrilling power-ups—including the new Color Cloud, Pharaoh's Dagger, and Lightning Storm, as well as four distinct levels of difficulty—and you've got a massively invigorating challenge for all levels of players.

A Bit of Ancient History

Since its launch in 2005, the *LUXOR* franchise has become one of the most successful brands ever in casual gaming. Not too long after its release, *LUXOR* was followed by the smash-hit *LUXOR: Amun Rising*. And just few months ago, MumboJumbo launched *LUXOR 2*, the highly anticipated sequel to the No. 1 casual game of 2005.

Designed in MumboJumbo's Dallas studios by the same award-winning team that created the original hit *LUXOR*, *LUXOR 2* sets a new graphical benchmark for casual games with 3D-like visuals, realistic reflections and shadowing, and stunning visual details throughout the game.

Across Foreign Lands

LUXOR was first made available to the PC download market. It has since shown extraordinary life as it has been successfully introduced into the PC retail market, mobile phones, handheld PDAs, and console market.

Currently, *LUXOR 2* is available as a PC download at **MSN® Games** (http://games.msn.com) in its Microsoft® Windows XP version—but get ready for the best *ever LUXOR* experiences as *LUXOR 2* makes its way to Microsoft Windows Vista™ (to be followed by its inclusion in Xbox Live® Arcade in early Spring 2007).

LUXOR 2 features more explosive power-ups than ever before!

On Windows Vista, *LUXOR 2*'s gameplay is much smoother and more intense. Lines are crisper, contrast is more pronounced, and the screen is more alive with incredible graphic details. Chain reactions bring on such a wealth of explosions and action that you may not be sure whether you should simply watch the screen or keep playing the game (we recommend that you keep playing). The overall impression is both massive and sublime with small particle effects such as birds flying through the background, wisps of smoke, and intense flickers that dance in the flames.

The depth of *LUXOR 2*'s soundscape is richer than in any previous version. New sound effects have been added to the game to ensure that the Windows Vista version of *LUXOR 2* will provide you with a thoroughly immersive experience.

And *LUXOR 2* for Windows Vista is completely compatible with the Xbox controller. The first time that you have a massive bunch of explosions and the controller starts to vibrate, you'll forget that you're playing on your PC—you'll be there!

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• Force feedback hit in 1996 with a whimper. Game manufacturers blamed sloppy implementation of Immersion's I-Force technology, and device builders blamed substandard software support. Still, the honor of being first goes to CH Products' Force FX joystick. Since then, everything from mice to steering wheels has used the force.

A BRIEF HISTORY

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Would you want this cringe-worthy controller on *your* desk? Maybe.

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REMOTELY CONTROLLABLE

You always remember your first. Maybe it helped you crack 220 mph at Indy or swoop beneath the murderous missiles of a hostile jet fighter. Yes, that first joystick must've felt liberating—until it started decalibrating *during* sorties, conflicting with newly installed hardware, and forcing you to whip out a screwdriver just to adjust the frigging trim.

But in 1990, Advanced Gravis' pioneering Analog Joystick—the joystick with the built-in screwdriver—was the very pinnacle of flight and driving control. It wasn't, however, Gravis' most popular peripheral. That honor belonged to the ubiquitous Gravis PC GamePad. While it did blatantly borrow ideas from Nintendo's NES and SNES controllers, the PC GamePad also featured some nifty perks—a removable minijoystick, Windows *and* DOS gaming compatibility (crazy!), and a reversible, ambidextrous design.

From these humble beginnings began a quest that continues today: to build a better joystick. How did we get where we are now? Sure, the latest controllers are snazzier and more capable than the antiques of yesteryear, but why hasn't anyone come along during the last decade and a half to completely tear down and rejig the joystick, re-padify the gamepad, and fuse the two into some mutant OmegaControlloTron? Several did, actually, and with wildly varying results. Let's walk down gamingdom's boulevard of broken gamepads to see some of the greatest hits—and misses—of these past 15-odd years.

Saitek's Cyborg Evo was a great joystick that you could customize to fit your mitt. If you hit eBay, you can probably still find one.

WHEN JOYSTICKS ROAMED THE EARTH

Historians date this early computer peripheral from sometime in the Precambrian period. But they could be a little off. Controllers were so twitchy back then, hardware adjusters and sliders were even on top of the controller.

THE AIR WAR

By 1992, CH Products and Thrustmaster had cut hard into the Gravis-dominated world of control devices, releasing button-littered sticks sporting upscale features such as viewing hats and proportional throttles. This was the golden age of flight sims, as both software and peripheral manufacturers tripped over themselves to thrill throttle jockeys. Thrustmaster soon released the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink F-16 FLCS, a fully programmable, macro-capable flight control unit. In addition, with Thrustmaster's add-on Throttle Quadrant System for the *left* hand, the keyboard was stripped from the PC cockpit.

It didn't take long for others to fulfill the last few missing needs of seasoned sim pilots. CH Products soon released its Pro Pedals rudder system (which doubled as driving pedals) and the Virtual Pilot flight yoke. Even Microsoft acknowledged the popularity >

OF CONTROLLERS

Putting gaming peripherals in perspective

of the genre it helped build with its *Flight Simulator* series by delivering a newfangled *pivoting* handle—for rudder control—into its first PC joystick, 1996's Sidewinder 3D Pro.

But not everyone flies planes or races cars. Sports gamers needed something to help them with a growing roster of actions and commands. Enter the modern pad. The Gravis Xterminator, which, with *dual* directional pads (one digital D-pad, one analog, and an analog throttle, no less), is the precursor to everything you see today on consoles. Sony should be thanking these guys.

THE "PERFECT" FPS CONTROLLER

Yet the gamepad wasn't the only controller vying to replace the keyboard/mouse combo—remember, mice had fewer buttons and more tracking hassles back in the late '90s. Some ambitious designs sought to control FPS games. The results? In a word: ugh. Logitech's WingMan Warrior was nicely built, but the mind-boggling design worked better for arcades. The WingMan Warrior housed a proper joystick (with triggers and all) on the right side, and on the left a hockey puck–like "spinner" that was supposed to serve as a mouse replacement—it actually flipped the aiming controls backward. Another head-scratcher was Microsoft's Sidewinder Dual Strike. The awkwardly evil boomerang shape had you twisting your right hand while leaving the left stationary. Carpal tunnel wasn't far behind.

ACT Labs' GS Gun System (1999) worked as advertised, "shooting" a light signal at the screen. It sufficed in lame-o arcade target shooters, but not so well in first-person games where players needed to work the keyboard with one hand and blast with the other. Worse still, only a smattering of titles supported it. That ACT currently manufactures a second generation USB version of its gun, even though it isn't compatible with LCDs, proves that MAME (Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator) target games and CRTs still have an audience.

THE WHEEL DEAL

1996 was a memorable year for PC racers. Up till then, the racing crowd had made do with a joystick or flimsy flight yoke/rudder pedal setup and a great imagination to pretend that they were behind the wheel. Finally, hardcore racers with rubber *and* money to burn could afford a real wheel. Extreme Competition Controls' Competition Driving System, a cockpit-worthy engineering marvel that cost more than a used car, kicked serious ass. Still in business today, ECCI and its Trackstar 6000 still pushes it to the redline.

While other companies either hit the pits (ACT Labs' awesome Force RS never made it to victory lane, but you can find it on eBay), companies like Thrustmaster and Logitech still jockey for the lead of the "affordable" driving controller race.

USB: A CURE FOR GAMING HEADACHES

With Windows 98 came one of the most significant changes for gamers—proper USB support. It may not sound like much now, but that one powered plug cured calibration and drift issues, proprietary-software-driver hassles, compatibility woes, and limited axis/button support. Mostly. Soon, a multitude of manufacturers rereleased USB versions of what were originally legacy gameport devices. After all, if CH Products had already built a near-perfect flight stick, why reinvent the wheel?

Besides, it's not like many flight sims are taxiing down the runway these days. Maybe the recent release of the DirectX 10–ready *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* will inspire people to buy Saitek's stunning new X52 Pro Flight Control System. Or you could just hit eBay and snap up battle-ready classics like Saitek's Cyborg Evo or CH Products' Fighterstick line.

These days, the PC has not only kept pace with console gamepads—the two are now merging. In the past few years, wireless and PlayStation 2–like pads—two of the best being Saitek's P3000 Wireless Gamepad and Logitech's Cordless Rumblepad 2—allowed players to pull off virtually every complex *Madden* move without ever reaching for the keyboard. However, with Microsoft's XNA initiative, its 360 controllers are now a gold standard for those who want one controller to handle both their Xbox *and* PC games.

BACK TO KEYBOARDS AND MICE

Meanwhile, action and FPS fans have, for the most part, rejected the alternatives and swarmed back to the venerable keyboard and mouse. Why? With the advent of optical and now laser tracking technology, scroll wheels, extra buttons, ergonomic grips, and, most recently, customizable weighting, mice have become incredibly versatile, accurate, and comfortable.

Microsoft was the first to use optical mouse technology with its IntelliMouse Explorer in 1999, but Logitech ultimately convinced everyone it was viable for gaming. These days, 2,000-dpi mice are the best of breed. Among the chief mousemakers: Razer's competition-centric Copperhead, Creative Labs' Fatal1ty line—even Microsoft is getting back in the game with the Habu (a rebranded Razer). But leading the mouse vanguard is Logitech's G series. Released in 2005, the G5 Laser Mouse remains tough to beat. Beyond the tacky texture, durable cord, and onboard dpi settings for up to 2,000-dpi resolution, it was the first to feature >

Microsoft's Xbox 360 Controller (top left) epitomizes the best a gamepad can offer while its Sidewinder Dual Strike (bottom left) represents just about the worst. Meanwhile, ACT Labs couldn't catch a break with either its GS Gun System (top right) or Force RS (bottom right).

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU'VE RIGHTED YOUR PLANE. NEXT UP: EMERGENCY LANDING IN THE JUNGLES OF THE CONGO.

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And where there's a mouse, a keyboard must follow. However, the idea of replacing a keyboard seems long gone. What you find now are manufacturers supplementing keyboards with USB peripherals. The most successful stabs are compact, micro-sized, ergonomic pads geared for gaming such as Belkin's Nostromo SpeedPad n52 or Ideazon's Fang. Both put all the critical controls at your fingertips.

GLIMPSES OF TOMORROW

So have we really come all that far since 1990? There's been progress, certainly, but a gamepad is still a gamepad, a joystick is still a joystick, and mice and keyboards still reign supreme for FPS games. Today we see more controls, more axes, and more USB and wireless connections, but nothing intrinsically different has yet caught on. Sources from Logitech and Saitek say Vista may open new doors, but what those doors are and what lies on the other side remain hush-hush.

Yet creativity and invention are far from dead. NaturalPoint's TrackIR 4:PRO, a head-mounted refugee from a '50s-era 3D movie theater, allows players to control the view (in supporting games) by moving their noggins. Even more "out there" is E3 2006's darling device, the Novint Falcon, a desktop pod that resembles a miniature satellite dish and simulates the tactile sensation of manipulating objects in 3D space.

Saitek continues courting the old school by perfecting the classics. According to product marketing manager Mark Starrett, increased sensitivity and reliability are the company's big focal points. In Saitek's case, this means using resilient "hall effect" sensors that are small, never change, and never wear out.

For its part, Logitech is embracing the future of force feedback now that it's developed a two-motor mechanism (as seen in its awesome new G25 Racing Wheel) that really does deliver stronger, more credible tactile sensations. As for a new breed of controllers we haven't yet seen, Logitech spokesperson Pamela McCracken warns that the company "can develop new game controllers, but without a game that supports the new features, the product will not make it to market." This possible shot at a past dearth of game design imagination notwithstanding, Logitech says this "also works the other way around. If a game developer is working on a new game concept—for example, sing-along games—they will outreach to Logitech for ways to make the experience more realistic or interactive. This is part of how new products like microphones and dancepads have come to market. Expect more of this in the future."

Dancepads? The truth is that social PC gaming, whether online or in person, may well be where the greatest future strides in controllers are made. Don't bet the farm on sending nasty force-feedback jolts to in-game losers or vibrating someone's pleasure centers in some, er, other types of games, but just look at what's happening right now in console-land. Nintendo's motion-sensitive Wii Remote controller is a natural pointing replacement for the mouse. (You can even hack a Wii Remote right now to work on a PC—see Hard News, page 107.)

Ultimately, the journey to a better PC controller has taken an evolutionary course. Could it be that Gravis et al got it right from the outset? Considering that serious innovation has been rejected again and again (and, more critically, that the games themselves haven't exactly been pillars of inventiveness), the answer is yes. But that doesn't stop people from trying. Blame human nature or blame game companies needing to sell new products from one year to the next—pads, sticks, and gaming mice will continue to play a big role years from now, but so too will motion-based and social-based peripherals. We're betting on radical new ways to interact with games coming down the road, whether with pointers, remotes, or even cranial data jacks (that last one's actually happening—researchers at Washington University in St. Louis have a subject playing *Space Invaders* with his brain). It's just not going to happen overnight. ● **Gord Goble (with additional geekery by Darren Gladstone)**

FANATEC HEÄD$HOT

Pimp My Mouse

MANUFACTURER: **Fanatec** PRODUCT NAME: **heäd$hôt** MSRP: **$100** PRICE: **www.fanatec.com**

REVIEW

Fanatec has crammed so many features into its heäd$hôt (sadly, no, that name isn't a typo) controller that it's hard to know where to start. First off is the obvious: a highly sensitive—and highly comfortable—2,000-dpi mouse capable of cranking up as high as 4,000 dpi with interpolation.

Big shock here: It meets your gaming needs. The lush rubber coating and wings propel the mouse while keeping the whole hand above the mousing surface.

Said surface serves not only as a mousepad and powered USB hub (you will need to plug in an AC adapter), but also as a cord management system. The coiled mouse cord plugs into the base and works in conjunction with the pad's arch—no other ways around it. The cord is too short to otherwise plug directly into the PC. And just to make sure everyone notices, it lights up—a Bat signal of dorkness that screams, "Lookit me!"

● **"Hey, ladies, wouldja like to check out my mouse?"**

Once you get over the embarrassing L337 speak (although we do grant bonus points for using "ä" and "$" in the same "word") and the incredibly garish light bar hanging over the mousepad, the heäd$hôt does a great job. Its single greatest strength, though, is the elegant software. A tiny 1.5MB driver install is all it takes to tack extra options on the Windows Mouse Properties page. Assigning buttons and creating macros are simple procedures. But beyond recording time delays and setting game preferences, the ability to emulate a joystick will knock out *Battlefield* fanatics. A faux driver transforms the mouse to joystick mode. The scroll wheel becomes the throttle, and you lift the mouse to recenter it. With practice, it can be a huge benefit to flyboys.

But is it worth $100? That depends on how comfortable you are with looking like a dork. We're not fans of the mousepad part of the package, but the software is worth its weight in gold. ● **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **More features than you'll know what to do with; elegant drivers; precise motion.**
- **Subtle, it's not.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

Welcome to California, Dude

This is California? Home of beach babes and surf contests? It might surprise you that California is also the home of snow bunnies and championship ski runs. Just like it might surprise you that Antec's world headquarters is located in California's Silicon Valley, the heart of technological innovation. Our unique California spirit of performance and originality help make Antec's products market leaders. Like our all-new Nine Hundred advanced gaming case or our environmentally friendly EarthWatts power supplies. So whether it's snowboarding or silicon chips or silent PC cases, think California. Think Antec. Think the Power of You.

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SAITEK X52 PRO FLIGHT CONTROL SYSTEM

Cleared for takeoff

MANUFACTURER: **Saitek** PRODUCT NAME: **X52 Pro Flight Control System** PRICE: **$200** URL: **www.saitekusa.com**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

Proper PC flight gear doesn't come cheap, and when it does, corners usually get cut—shoddy construction, not enough buttons, or the lack of a multifunction display (MFD). But that's not the case with Saitek's X52 line. Last year, Saitek had the right stuff, and after a year of listening to user feedback, along comes the X52 Pro—which polishes out old, rough edges to become the finest flight kit around.

Hands slide into the smooth rubberized finish. Your right hand eases into the stick, and the two hat switches, six buttons, and analog dials greet the fingertips exactly where your hand rests. Over- and undersized mitts can work the controls equally well thanks to the five-position adjustable grip that locks quickly into place. Most importantly, the controller is responsive. Whether you're twisting the 3D rudder or banking into a steep turn, the stick feels solid and like it belongs in the cockpit. The only problem—and this is almost a universal one for flight sticks—is the lack of force feedback. Do some pilots want to fight a tight turn? Maybe.

One thing that all pilots crave, though, is a fully functional throttle—and that's the heart and soul of the X52 Pro. The progressive throttle tension glides smoothly and precisely whether the engine is idle or kicking in afterburners. What most will notice is the highly customizable—and bright—MFD. Out of the box, it'll display flight time and the radio stack for *Flight Simulator X*. Saitek is even leaving its code open so that you can program the MFDs to your liking, per game.

Amazingly, all this is jammed into a package that is $100 less than what some competitors offer. Sure, $200 may sound like a lot (especially if you add another $150 for Saitek's awesome Pro Flight Rudder Pedals), but it's better than the pricey alternatives—besides, nobody's landing a 747 using only a keyboard and mouse.◆**Darren Gladstone**

◆If you need a flight stick, don't bother looking anywhere else.

VERDICT

- **Incredibly customizable; lush feel; great MFD.**
- **No force feedback (not than many other flight sticks have it).**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

LOGITECH G25 RACING WHEEL

Ferrari performance, Honda price

MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRODUCT NAME: **Logitech G25 Racing Wheel** PRICE: **$300** URL: **www.logitech.com**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

The Logitech G25 Racing Wheel is the finest mass-market driving rig ever released. It looks cool, feels *great*, adapts to any player's preferences, and will make you a better racer.

The G25 comes with three parts—wheel, shifter, and pedals. Housed in black plastic and featuring a comfortable leather-wrapped steering wheel and two hair-trigger Formula 1–style shifting levers, the wheel module is cutting edge. It has none of the steering jitters of other mass-market units. The G25 rotates as little as 40 or as much as 900 degrees and its two (!) force-feedback motors are powerful enough to snap your wrist. No lie. Our only beef is with the mounting system; the clamps are plastic, not metal, and they won't fit tables thicker than 1.25 inches.

The stand-alone gearshift offers sequential and six-speed shifting and a whopping 12 programmable buttons. If it weren't for the slight twitchiness of the stick, we'd love it—it's just too easy to bump into the wrong gear accidentally.

The magic happens when you drop the hammer down on the pedals. Smooth, responsive metal pads put you in the cockpit for a fraction of the price of a real car (or ECCI's pricey Trackstar 6000 sim wheel). Moreover, the unit has a carpet grip that sticks to the floor even if you work the clutch like a madman.

While the G25 lacks the heavy-duty construction of some elite $1,500 racing wheel setup, it more than makes up for it with performance, quality, and price. Don't get us wrong: $300 is by no means cheap. But if you take your racing seriously, this is by far the best ride around.◆**Gord Goble**

VERDICT

- **Amazing handling; monster force feedback; stable, smooth pedals.**
- **Questionable clamping system; slightly finicky stick shift; a little pricey.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

◆The wheel itself feels great, sure, but there's a lot more to the G25. The satisfying stick shift and perfect pedals make this a tough deal to beat. The only better set we've found is ECCI's $1,500 Trackstar system. This is a slightly cheaper option.

THIS GEAR DOESN'T EXACTLY COME CHEAP. BUT THESE ARE SOME OF THE BEST PERIPHERALS AROUND.

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech

IN CONTROL

PERIPHERAL THINKING

In honor of this month's look at controllers, let's take a peek at what's happening in the console controller world—and how it pertains to you.

XBOX 360/PC CONTROLLERS

If you have an Xbox 360, you probably know that the console's wired controllers work with your PC by plugging into your USB port—but soon you'll be able to use your wireless controllers, too. We got our hands on Microsoft's wireless adapter for 360 controllers (and other 360 peripherals), and it works simply enough. Press a button on the controller and the button atop the adapter to pair the two devices. Suddenly you have peripherals serving double duty for the PC and Xbox 360. Initial tests show that the wireless gamepad works well. Unfortunately, we didn't receive final drivers in time for proper testing with Microsoft's Xbox 360 Wireless Headset and Xbox 360 Wireless Racing Wheel. Stay tuned for full tests.

WII-MOTE PC

Who says that we can't learn a thing or two from consoles? Ever since the Wii launched in mid-November, an industrious gang of hardware hackers have figured out how to get the Wii Remote working on the PC. The idea is simple—replace the mouse with a pointer that has a built-in accelerometer. It's still very much a work in progress, but if you're determined, here's how you can play *Half-Life 2* in Windows with your Wii Remote right now:

1 GO BLUETOOTH

The Wii Remote is a Bluetooth device. So if you have a notebook with Bluetooth built in, great—you can move on to the next step. Otherwise, USB adapters are available for about $50 that will get you all hooked up in short order. The trick is buying a supported adapter that uses either the Widcomm or BlueSoleil Bluetooth stack. Here are two sure-fire choices: Belkin Bluetooth USB Adapter F8T012v and Targus USB Bluetooth Adapter.

2 WIISCOVER

Put your Wii-mote into discovery mode by pressing the 1 and 2 buttons at the same time or by pressing the red Sync button located by the batteries. The Wii Remote will show up on your computer as "Nintendo RVL-CNT-01" (Vendor ID: 0x057e; Product ID: 0x0306). No need to pair the device—if your PC sees it, you're on your way.

As crazy as it sounds, yes, this could actually work for PC games—eventually.

3 GET DRIVERS

Some have been using the GlovePIE driver (http://carl.kenner.googlepages.com/glovepie) to get the Wii-mote to work in Windows XP. Others like the more novice-friendly WiinRemote (http://onakasuita.org/wii/index-e.html). The graphic user interface for WiinRemote might seem a little more manageable.

4 KEEP WATCHING

Keep in mind that the hacking community is constantly exploding with updates. As we go to press, there are plans to add support for IR and the Wii Nunchuk as well. **Darren Gladstone**

(geek)

(clustergeeking)

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THE NEXT HALL OF FAME GAME

Jeff gets busy with his very own gaming project

COLUMN

[The following article originally appeared in the August 2000 issue of Computer Gaming World *(#193).—Ed.]*

There comes a time in every journalist's life when he must stop being a mere observer of life, a critic of others, and actually create something himself. That time has come for me at last. Although I'm sure I could keep ridiculing everything forever, I'm beginning to feel that at my age (94 this month), it's time to challenge myself, to "jump into the fray," as my mom used to say, and to "stop wasting the earth's oxygen."

So, I have a big announcement to make. After all these years on the sidelines, I am finally taking it all—my gaming expertise, my intellectual know-how, my All-American can-do gumption—and making a computer game of my own. Yes, I know it won't be easy. I know the road will be long and hard. But surely anything I come up with will be better than, say, a Simon and Schuster game, right? How hard could that be?

So what follows is a copy of my preliminary design notes. Please be forewarned that I'm sharing this information in good faith. If any of this actually shows up in someone else's game, expect a threatening call from the goons in Ziff's legal department.

GAME NAME

This is crucial. I'll need something catchy. Something sexy. Something the marketing guys will like. Something like *Jeff Green's Pancreas*. That has a good ring to it. It's got my name on it—which is an obvious plus—and research shows that gamers always go for those cool one-word titles, like *Myst* or *Quake* or *Abomination*. It's clean and simple and gets the point across with maximum efficiency and energy. Alternate title: *Jeff Green's Albatross*.

GAME CONCEPT

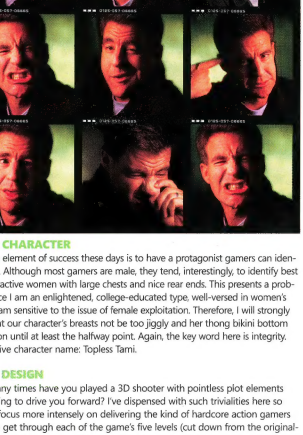
What should the game be about? Always a conundrum, this. My publishers suggested I combine two of the most popular games of the past couple years into one: *Who Wants to Hunt Regis Philbin?* Not only did I reject this, but I threatened to void the contract altogether. I'm no whore, and I'm not going to settle for the Wal-Mart and bubba crowd with my very first game. Better to wait until I get desperate—like Activision and Sierra—before sinking to that level.

No, I aim to take the high road. Something that the hardest of the hardcore can embrace. Something to make me a Usenet hero. My game: a 2D turn-based flight sim, based on the obscure but beloved Belgian board game Zuffstaffle Geese Fighters.

This isn't about sales, okay? This isn't about "making a profit." This is about gaming, my friends. This is about integrity, with no compromise—ever.

GAME CONCEPT, ROUND TWO

Okay, I just got off the phone with my publishers, and we've decided to compromise. Instead of the 2D turn-based flight sim, I've agreed to go with a 3D shooter—think *Tomb Raider*-lite. Also, we've got some sponsors on board, so the new title is *Pepsi Geese Fighter*.



MAIN CHARACTER

One key element of success these days is to have a protagonist gamers can identify with. Although most gamers are male, they tend, interestingly, to identify best with attractive women with large chests and nice rear ends. This presents a problem. Since I am an enlightened, college-educated type, well-versed in women's rights, I am sensitive to the issue of female exploitation. Therefore, I will strongly insist that our character's breasts not be too jiggly and her thong bikini bottom remain on until at least the halfway point. Again, the key word here is integrity.

Tentative character name: Topless Tami.

LEVEL DESIGN

How many times have you played a 3D shooter with pointless plot elements pretending to drive you forward? I've dispensed with such trivialities here so we can focus more intensely on delivering the kind of hardcore action gamers want. To get through each of the game's five levels (cut down from the originally-projected 25), gamers will have to find three special items, which I've called the "red key," "blue key," and "green key." As an added "eye candy" bonus, each key will be emblazoned with the Pepsi logo. Research shows that gamers in the target demographic have strong brand loyalty. Finding keys will be like finding cans of Pepsi—thus making players love the game even more.

DESIGN TEAM

Although my original recommendations called for an "A-Team" of the industry's best (Sid Meier, Peter Molyneux, and Phil Steinmeyer were all short-listed), both budget concerns and deadline pressures have forced me into "Plan B." I'll be calling Simon and Schuster later this afternoon. If all goes well, expect to see *Pepsi Presents: Topless Tami's Sex Gun Orgy* (my new title) later this year. It's a game that the whole industry will be proud of. ■ **Jeff Green**

Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn't realize is that his staff is reprinting one of his favorite columns while he's out sick with debilitating pneumonia. Wish him well at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

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